

# AIR WAR COLLEGE

## RESEARCH REPORT

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LINEBACKER II

AN EXAMINATION OF STRATEGIC USE OF AIRPOWER

LIEUTENANT COLONEL GEORGE R. JACKSON

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Air War College  
Air University

Linebacker II - An Examination  
of Strategic Use of Airpower

by

George R. Jackson  
Lt Col, USAF

A Defense Analytical Study Submitted To The Faculty

In

Fulfillment of The Curriculum  
Requirement

Advisor: Colonel Robert I. Bond

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Linebacker II - An Examination of Strategic Use  
of Airpower

Author: George R. Jackson, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

→ After a decade of fragmented and inconclusive political/military actions in Vietnam, Linebacker II was implemented on Dec 18, 1972 and strategic use of airpower became the military instrument designed to successfully terminate U.S. involvement in Vietnam. This study examines why it took almost ten years for decision-makers to decide on strategic use of airpower even though such action was first advocated by General Curtis Lemay at the 1964 Honolulu conference. This paper also provides an historical analysis of events that lead to Linebacker II and makes the following conclusions:

- (1) Misidentification of the enemy and his center of gravity prevented senior officials from adapting the Linebacker II strategy until it was the only option available.
- (2) Although generally considered a success, Linebacker II contained tactical and operational defects which almost invalidated the concept of strategic airpower as a war-winning endeavor. (609)
- (3) Linebacker II might not be a "once in history" operation. Although it was the last strategic use of airpower, there are important lessons that must be considered if U.S. forces need to conduct such

an air campaign in the future.

Linebacker II was the last strategic air operation mounted by American air forces. There are important lessons that must be considered if U.S. forces need to conduct such an air campaign in the future.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel George R. Jackson is an Air Force pilot with approximately 4,000 flying hours. Much of this time was spent flying B52D model aircraft and the B-1B. LtC Jackson holds a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering from Lamar University, a Masters of Liberal Arts from Texas Christian University, and a Masters of Science from East Texas State University. He entered the Air Force in 1970 after graduation from Officer Training School and Lackland AFB. Subsequently, he served four years (70-74) at Columbus AFB, MS as a T-37 instructor pilot (IP); four years (74-78) at Carswell AFB, TX as a B-52 IP; two years (78-79) at Andersen AFB, Guam as a B-52 IP and flying safety officer; three more years (79-82) at Carswell AFB as a B-52 IP and Chief of Bomber Standardization and Evaluation; four years (82-86) at the Pentagon as an action officer and an executive officer; and finally two years (86-88) at Dyess AFB, TX flying the B-1B. George is a graduate of Squadron Officers School, Air Command and Staff, and the Air War College class of 1989.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

| CHAPTER  | Page |
|--|------|
| DISCLAIMER . . . . .   | ii   |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY. . . . .   | iii  |
| BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH. . . . .   | iv   |
| INTRODUCTION . . . . .   | 1    |
| I. Key Historical Issues . . . . .   | 8    |
| II. Linebacker II - Reviewing the Precursors<br>to Strategic Airpower. . . . . | 17   |
| III. Linebacker II - The Operation. . . . .                                    | 27   |
| IV. Linebacker II - Some Lessons Learned . . . . .                             | 47   |
| V. Linebacker II - Conclusions. . . . .  | 53   |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .   | 61   |

## INTRODUCTION

This analysis of Linebacker II addresses three basic questions. First, what were the critical events which led to Linebacker II? Second, what were the lessons learned from this operation? Third, and finally, how does Linebacker II affect future military air campaigns.?

Before I begin the primary analysis, I will define Linebacker II and it's significance. What was Linebacker II? Simply, it was an eleven day air campaign to end a ten year war in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> It was strategic use of airpower envisioned by General Curtis E. LeMay, USAF Chief of Staff, early in 1964. As General William W. Momyer reported: "General LeMay argued for a concentrated attack against targets in the heart of North Vietnam. Indirect attacks in South Vietnam and Laos, in his judgment, were not apt to be decisive."<sup>2</sup> Linebacker II was an American expression of determination aimed squarely at the enemy's will to fight.

Why does this air option warrant attention; why is it significant? Linebacker II is important because strategic airpower was used as a war-winning instrument of national policy (without land or sea forces). It is important because it was a tactical, an operational and strategic success.<sup>3</sup>

A Tactical Success - Our effort: 729 strategic bombing sorties, 15,000 tons of ordnance and over 1,100 support aircraft. Results, (damaged or destroyed): 1,600 military targets, 500 rail complexes, 372 pieces of rolling stock, one-fourth of North



Vietnam's petroleum reserves, ten airfield runways or ramps,  
. . . and so forth.<sup>4</sup> (See figures 1 & 2.)

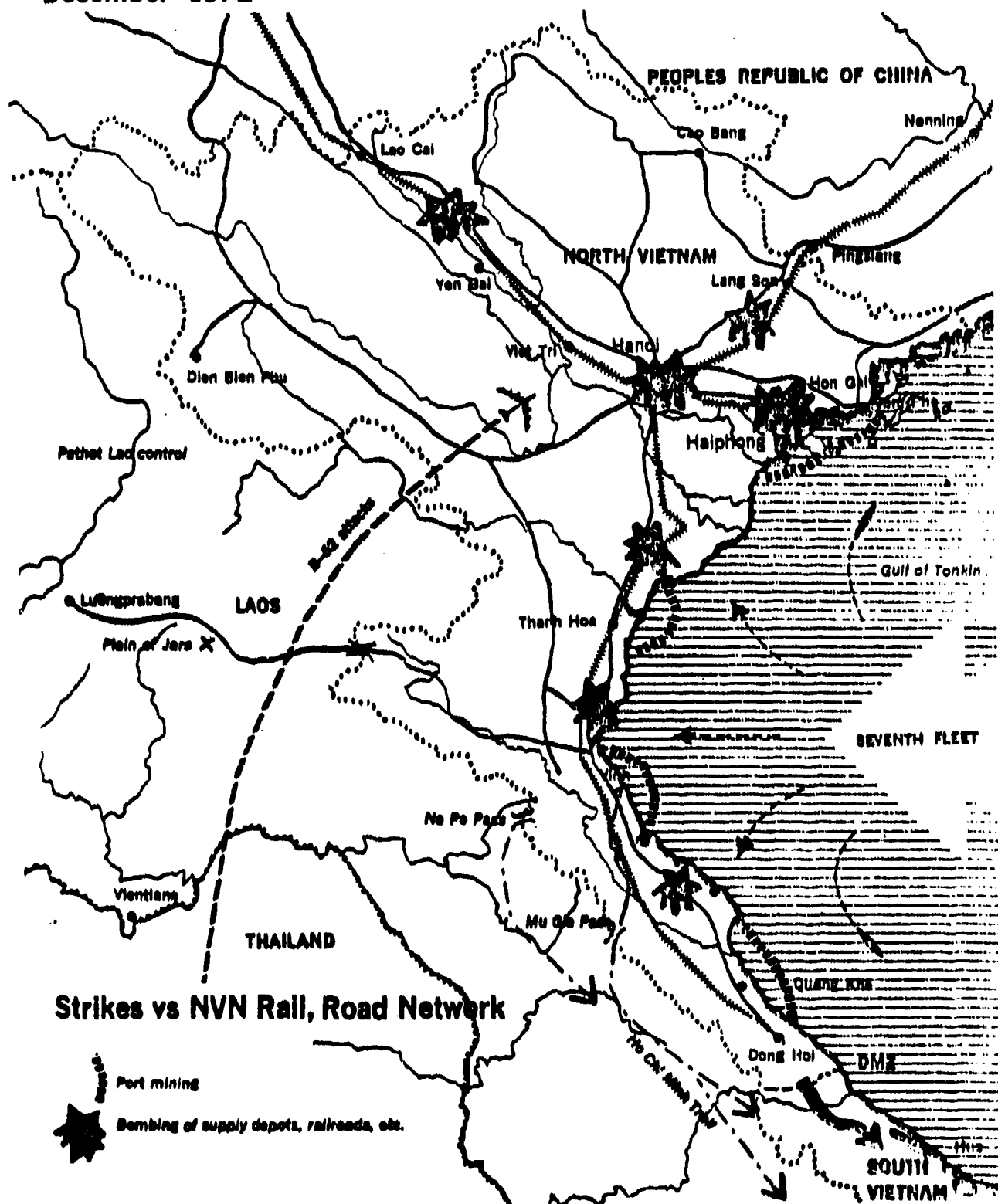
An Operational Success - The above results were achieved with minimum combat losses. Looking just at the B-52's which penetrated the highest threat zones - Hanoi and Haiphong, the loss rate was four per cent.<sup>5</sup> It's worthwhile to note that Eighth Air Force experienced 20% to 40% loss rates over Germany between 1943 and 1944.<sup>6</sup> Looking at all of the TACAIR sorties during Linebacker II, the loss rate was about 0.5%.<sup>7</sup> TACAIR losses escorting bombers into Germany during the 43-44 period were about 1.0%.<sup>8</sup> \* (See figures 3 & 4)

A Strategic Success - After years of on-again, off-again negotiations, the North Vietnamese were moved to decisive action during Linebacker II. On 20 December (two days into the action), North Vietnam petitioned to resume peace talks. On 27 December the North Vietnamese accepted the American peace terms agenda. By January 1973 Kissinger made good on his "peace is at hand" prophecy.<sup>9</sup>

In summation, Linebacker II is important and worthy of attention for two reasons. First, it was a war - terminating military strategy based on strategic airpower. Second, Linebacker II is important because 'it worked as advertised', and there are implication's for future conflicts where we may use airpower

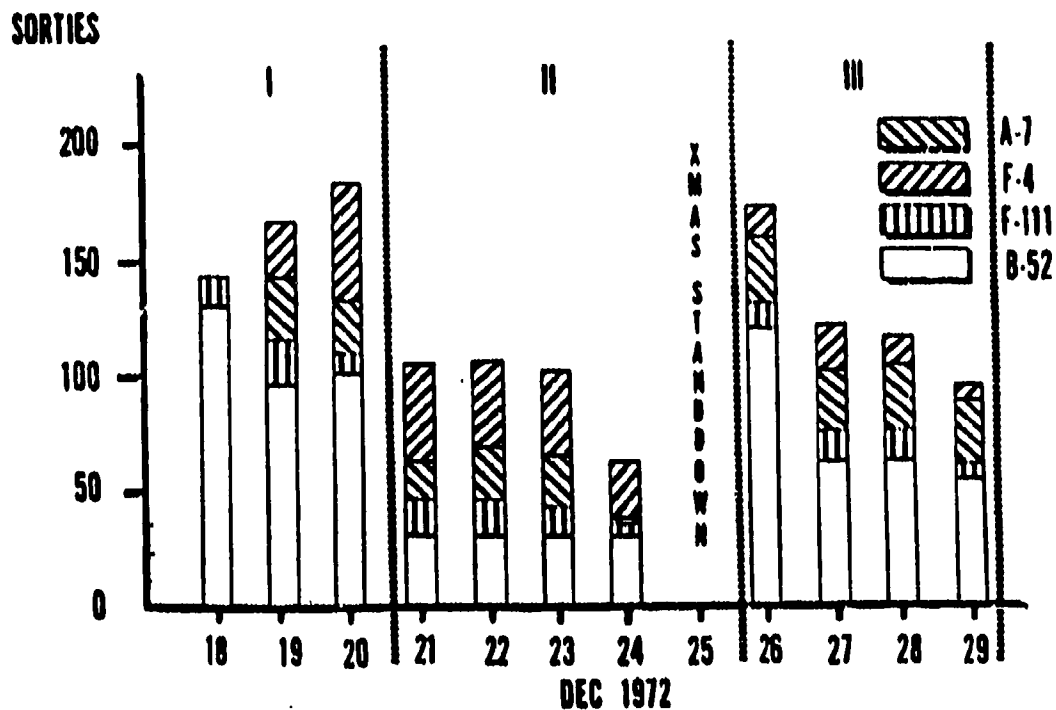
\* We will examine the causes for such high bomber losses during WWII in Chapter 2.

# USAF Linebacker II Offensive Against North Vietnam December 1972

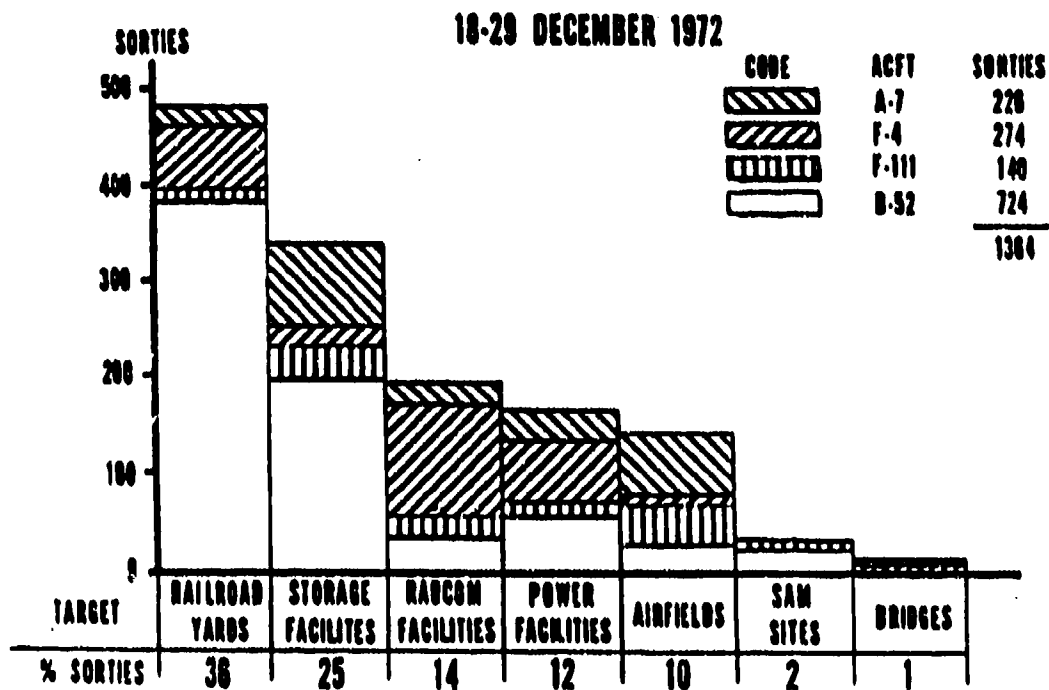


SOURCE: Berger, Carl, Ed., *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973*, Washington DC, Office of Air Force History, 1977, p. 93.

Figure 1



The three phases of LINEBACKER II.



LINEBACKER II target/sortie breakout.

Figure 2

Source: Major Karl Eschman, The Role of TACAIR Support Linebacker II

# BOMBER LOSSES 6 MO. PERIODS

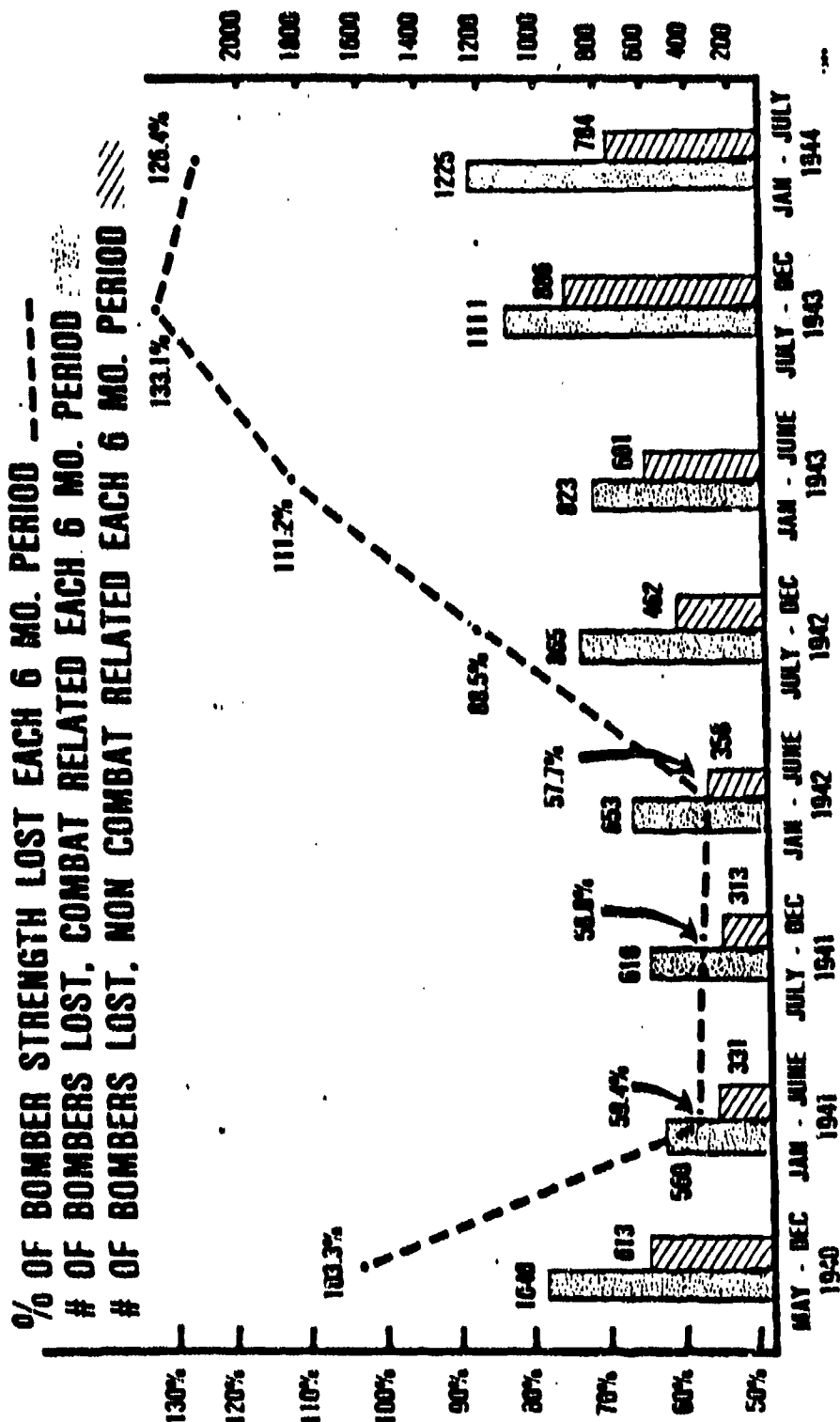


Figure 3  
Source: Strategy For Defeat, p. 305

# AIRCRAFT WRITTEN OFF: EIGHTH AIR FORCE 1943 (HEAVY BOMBERS)

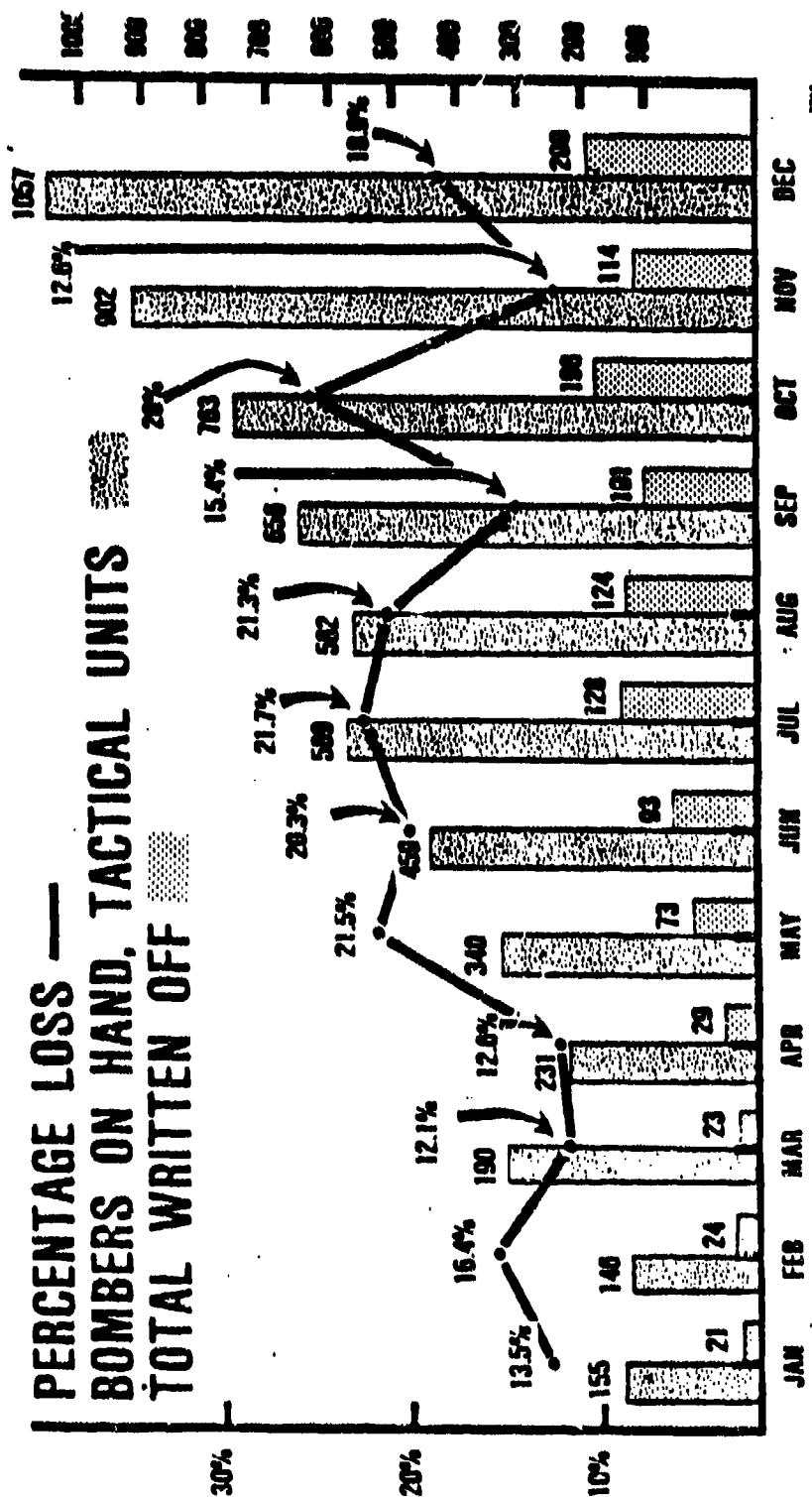


Figure 4  
Source: Strategy For Defeat, p. 175.

as the decisive element of combat. Said another way, Linebacker II results suggests there are military scenarios where ground and sea forces would support an airpower campaign plan. Let's begin our analysis with a review of some key historical issues pertinent to Vietnam and strategic air power.

## Chapter I Key Historical Issues

To understand the Linebacker II air campaign, we need two common historical references. First, in capsulized form, we need some historical concept of the belligerents - North and South Vietnam. Second, in equally brief form, we need some historical concept of strategic airpower development.

A short course in Vietnam history starts in 250 B.C. when the Vietnamese originally migrated from southern China. The Vietnamese remained in the northern parts of Vietnam until the 17th century when settlers and pioneers pushed south into the Mekong Delta.<sup>10</sup> With this migration, came a natural decentralization of political and social forces. From the 17th to the 19th century Vietnam developed as two entities. Generally, North Vietnam developed above the 17th parallel (DONG HOI) and South Vietnam developed below the 16th parallel (DA NANG) as shown in figure 5. There were many unsuccessful efforts to unify the country until 1802 when Nguyen Anh became emperor of Vietnam. His reign ended in 1858 when the French arrived in Da Nang.<sup>11</sup> For the next hundred years, the French, the Japanese, and then the French again tried to control Vietnam. And during this period, two themes developed. The first theme was resentment of Vietnamese to all foreigners. The second theme was a resurgent effort to re-unify North and South as one Vietnam. By 1927, the young Communist Nguyen Ai Quoc (AKA Ho Chi Minh) and his aide Vo Nguyen Giap already had long range

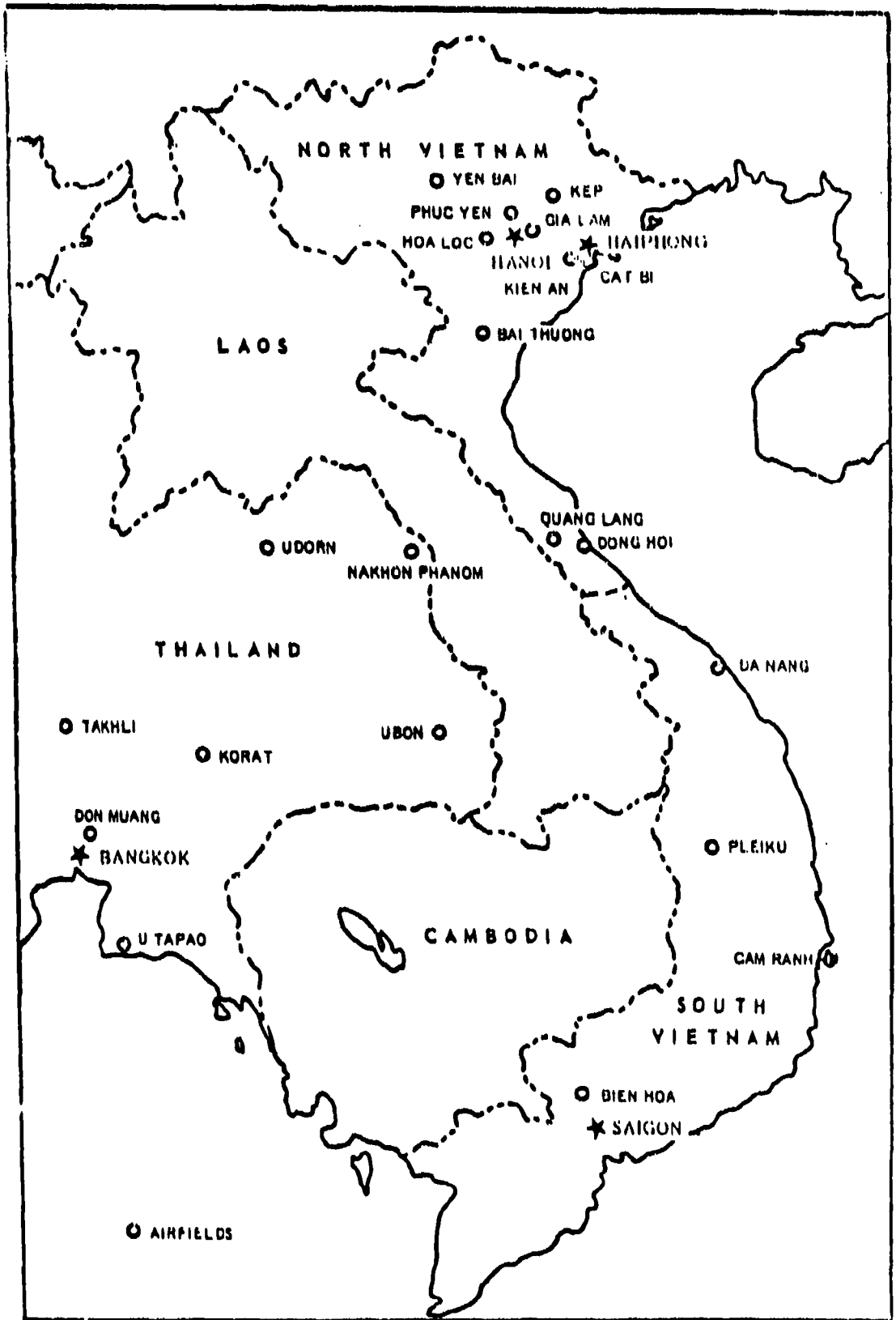


Figure 5  
Source: Military Strategy, AWC Curriculum



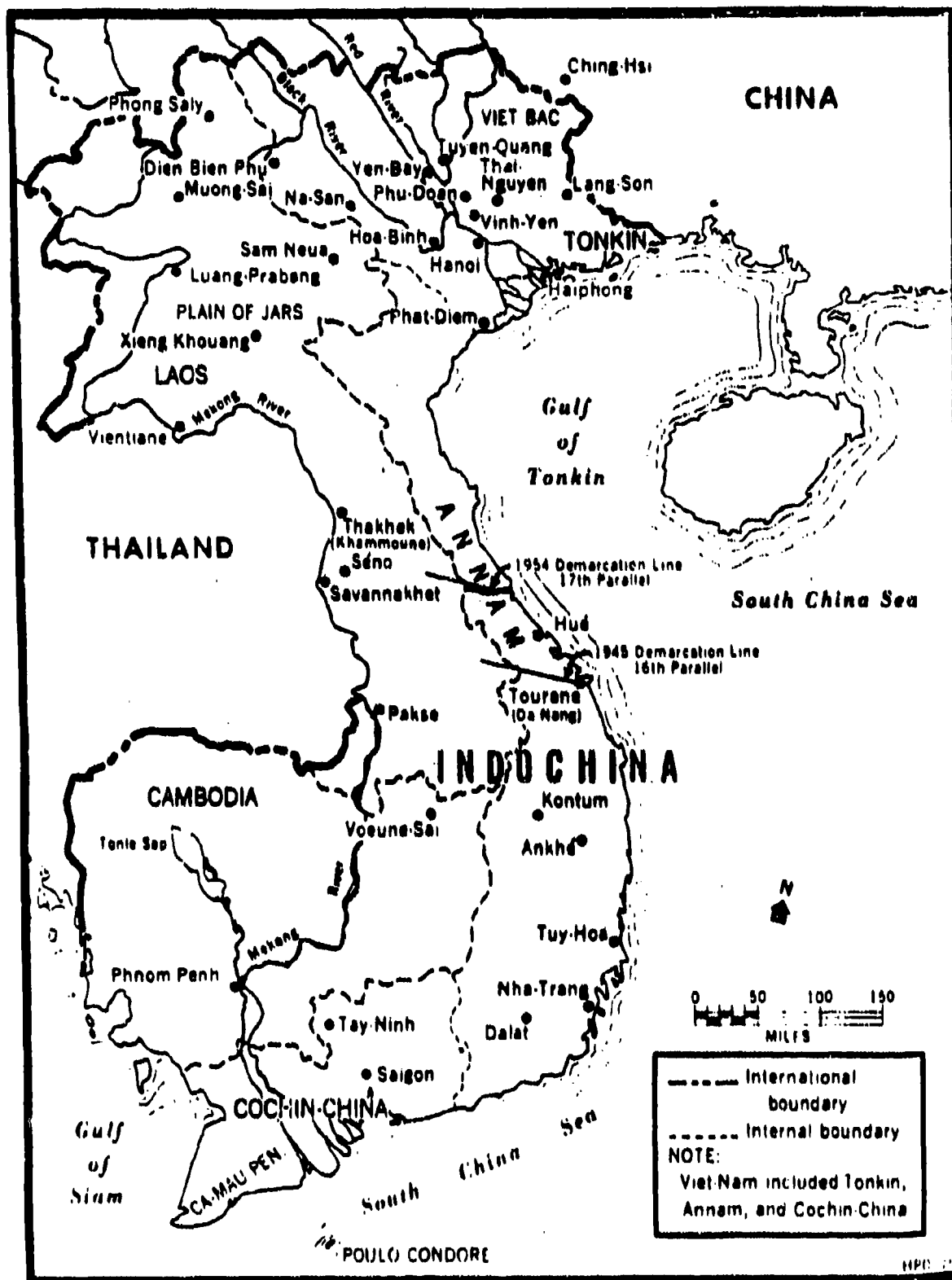
plans for the country.<sup>12</sup>

Vietnam was divided after WWII and again in 1954 by the Geneva accords (see figure 6), but the two previous themes were unchanged. There was still resentment of all foreigners and North Vietnam leadership still planned to unify (forcibly if necessary) the two Vietnams. Into this environment came the Americans.

As a former State department official remarked to me: "We now had white and black faces wearing green berets (the Americans) replacing white and black faces wearing red berets (the French)." On the surface, it does seem odd that after throwing out all previous foreigners, the Vietnamese were expected to support American intervention; especially, intervention designed to support an intellectual, Catholic, French-speaking leadership in a country of peasants and Buddhists. (Note: Throughout our Vietnam involvement, there was never a leader with qualities and capabilities like Syngman Rhee whom we supported in South Korea). Vietnamese resentment of foreigners, and government by weak, unpopular heads of state paled in significance to a separate and distinct American strategic deficit - misinterpretation of the enemy.

John M. Gates\* did not get it right when he called Vietnam

\* John M. Gates is Professor of History at The College of Wooster in Wooster OH, he teaches military, American, and Latin American history. He received a B.A. in history from Stanford University, 1959, and an M.A. from the Stanford School of Education, 1960, and a Ph.D. in history at Duke University, 1967. Prof. Gates is the author of schoolbooks and Drags: The United States Army in the Philippines, 1898-1902, 1973.



### FRENCH INDOCHINA (1946-1954)

SOURCE: Condit, D.M. and Bert N. Cooper, Jr., et al., *Challenge and Response in Internal Conflict*, Vol. 1, *The Experience in Asia*, Washington DC, The American University, 1968, p. 238.

Figure 6

a revolutionary civil war, not a conventional one.<sup>13</sup> Ho Chi Minh and General Giap intended to unite Vietnam under their leadership. Col Harry Summers did have it right when he said:

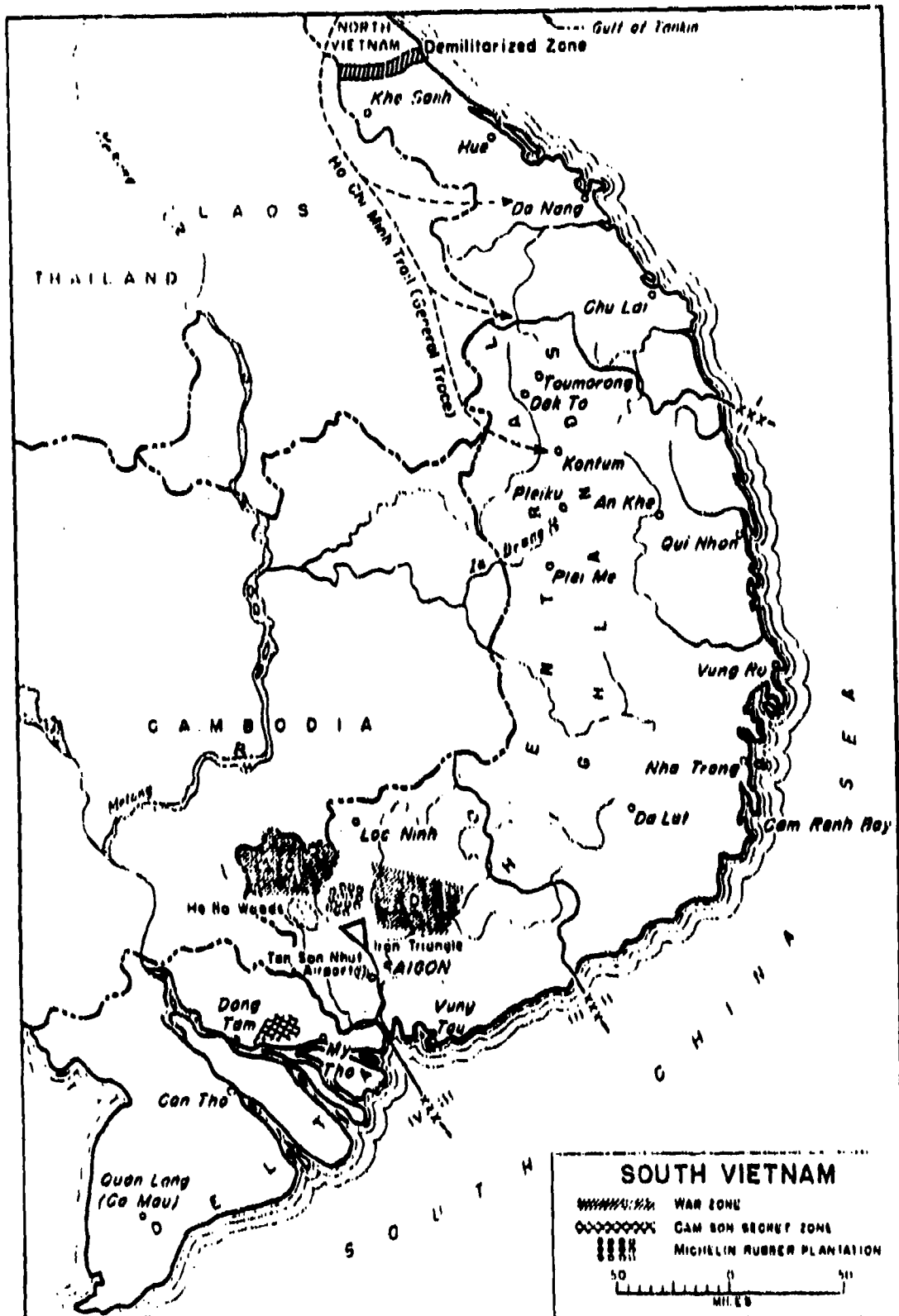
Because we failed to correctly identify the nature of the war, we failed to identify the center of gravity. Because we misperceived the Vietnam war as a revolutionary war, we saw the Viet Cong as the center of gravity.

To validate the enemy's identity, it is worthwhile to quote again from Col Summers article.

In a French television documentary broadcast on 16 Feb 1983, North Vietnamese Generals Vo Nguyen Giap and Vo Bam freely admitted their subterfuge. As reported by The Economist, General Bam admitted the decision to unleash an armed revolt against the Saigon government was taken by a North Vietnamese Communist plenum in 1959. . . . So much for the story that the Ho Chi Minh trail was established only to counteract the American military build-up . . . General Bam got his orders on May 19, 1959: . . . (See<sup>15</sup> figure 7 for Ho Chi Minh Trail routes)

Our capsulized historical review now leads to two observations. First, there was considerable reason to believe Americans should not expect indigenous support for the war effort. Second, the enemy's center of gravity was North Vietnam's warfighting capability; this was not a revolutionary war. With the observations made, let's briefly review the concept of strategic airpower.

First, strategic airpower concepts are very new in warfighting. Despite the glamour associated with WWI air combat, professional militarists gave it scant recognition. General



South Vietnam.

Figure 7

Source: Military Strategy, AWC Curriculum

Pershing's official end of the war report devoted less than one page to the effects of Air Power in WWI. Even by 1926 the War Department and the General Staff envisioned limited tasks for military aviation

. . . airpower was an auxiliary to assist American ground forces, in destroying the enemy land army.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the doctrinal vacuum on airpower, there were staunch advocates for military aviation. Giulio Douhet, Billy Mitchell and Alexander de Seversky were practical theorists who saw tremendous potential in airpower.<sup>17</sup> Of these three men, it was Douhet who first and most clearly outlined the value of strategic use of airpower. It is worthwhile to note his major assumptions:

(1) Aircraft are instruments of offense of incompatible potentialities, against which no effective defense can be foreseen;

(2) Civilian morale will be shattered by bombardment of centers of population.

Upon this foundation he constructed a set of corrolaries for military aviation:

(a) In order to assure an adequate national defense, it is necessary-and sufficient-to be in a position( in case of war) to conquer the command of the air.

(b) The primary objectives of aerial attack should not be the military installations, but industries

and centers of population remote from the contact of the surface armies.

(c) An enemy air force, in particular, should not be dealt with by combat in the air but primarily by destruction of the ground installations and of the factories from which its supplies of materiel come.

(d) The role of surface forces should be a defensive one, designed to hold a front and to prevent an enemy advance along the surface and in particular an enemy seizure by surface action of one's own communications, industries, and airforce establishments, while the development of one's own aerial offensive is proceeding with its paralysis of the enemy's capacity to maintain an army and the enemy people's will to endure.

(e) In the interest of the most economical application of total effort, the use of specialized fighting aircraft for defense against enemy bombers should be foregone. The basic type of air force equipment should be a "battle plane," which conducts bombardment and is at the same time self-defending, or can alternatively be used solely for combat purposes.<sup>18</sup>

Simply stated, Douhet believed you should gain control of the air and then bomb population centers and industry until the enemy surrendered. (This is an extremely important tenet. Considering Vietnam, in the South there were no "Douhet targets";

in the North there were.)

The issues concerning strategic air power are still much debated. Whether strategic airpower can "win wars" depends somewhat on your perspective; however, both sides of this argument can find historical support. Generals Hansel, Arnold and Spaatz thought strategic airpower could defeat Germany. Winston Churchill and General Eisenhower disagreed. They thought a land invasion and occupation was mandatory.<sup>19</sup> In Europe we invaded. The same pro and con arguments about airpower were applied to the war in Japan. Here we did not make a land invasion. The point is this - Douhet believed you needed two key elements to apply his maxims. One, you needed a strategic airpower capability. Two, you needed strategic targets. For eleven days in 1972, Linebacker II matched strategic airpower and strategic targets with precision.

In conclusion, the historical review suggests several important aspects that affected the Linebacker II strategic air power operation. First, the majority of the South Vietnamese populace would not welcome an American military presence. Second, the war in Vietnam was conventional not revolutionary. Third, if the North Vietnamese political/military organization was the enemy center of gravity, U.S. strategic airpower had the capability to attack and destroy enemy strategic targets. We will begin our analysis of Linebacker II with a look at events that led up to the operation.

## Chapter II

### Linebacker II - Reviewing the Precursors to Strategic Airpower

War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.<sup>20</sup>

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature.<sup>21</sup>

Carl Von Clausewitz

Linebacker II as an operation began on 18 December and ended 29 December 1972, but the concepts of strategic airpower began five decades earlier. After WWI, General Pershing relegated airpower to a support role;<sup>22</sup> but others, air pioneers like Douhet and Mitchell, had very definite views on the future of military aviation. Though they differed on some technical aspects of air doctrine, Douhet and Mitchell basically saw future air combat as follows.<sup>23</sup> First, establish air supremacy; clear the enemy air force from the battle. Second, use massive strategic air strikes against strategic targets (population centers, industry, etc.); thereby destroying the enemy capability and will to fight. Finally, use land armies as required to eliminate disorganized resistance; invasion and occupation would only be required if necessary to achieve the political goals. Obviously, the U.S. had the capability to achieve air supremacy and mount a massive strategic air assault against North Vietnam almost from the outset of the conflict. Why then did America wait until December 1972 to undertake such a successful action? Simply, the answer is not everyone agreed that Douhet and



Mitchell were right. Indeed some of the hottest debate over air doctrine raged within the military air community itself.

The Air Corps Tactical school was established in 1920 to develop air doctrine; nevertheless, upon our entry into WWII, there still was no clear, singular doctrine for employment of U.S. airpower.<sup>24</sup> As late as 1931 the tactical school doctrine stated:

. . . the air force will be subordinate, although a most important auxiliary, [to] the ground forces.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, there was support for Douhet and Mitchell. In 1934 the tactical school bombardment text proclaimed:

Bombardment aviation properly employed, can shatter a nation's will to resist; it can destroy the economical and industrial structures which make possible the very existence of modern civilization.<sup>26</sup>

The key phrase is "bombardment aviation properly employed".

This was a most controversial point. Some bomber enthusiasts believed well armed massed bomber formations were unstoppable; but fighter enthusiasts insisted that bombers could not penetrate organized fighter defenses. As General Haywood Hansel related, the Battle of Britain left General Tooeey Spaatz with the following impression:

Bombers can still win the war if: (1) Bombers fly good formation (2) Bombers fly in large wings-lots of airplanes (3) Bombers have big guns and big bombs.

In other words, General Spaatz believed the Germans failed because of their tactics not because of British fighters.

From 1943 to 1944 U.S. air forces tried to validate the unstoppable bomber concept with massed bomber raids deep into

Germany. Without appropriate fighter escort, the bomber losses were catastrophic - 20% to 40% loss rates with occasional single day losses of 60%.<sup>27</sup> So it seems fighter escort was required to "properly employ" bomber aviation; however, that was a tactical issue. On the strategic issue, history tends to support Douhet, Mitchell and their followers. Data from WWII indicates a strategic bombing campaign could be a war-winning strategy. In his book Air Power and Limited War, Mark Clodfelter documents the results of strategic bombing in Europe and Japan. Acknowledging that strategic bombing was not fully coordinated until 1944, he notes:

Not until the latter stages of the war against both Germany and Japan did the brunt of the Allied strategic bombing campaigns occur. The Anglo-American Bomber Commands dropped 1,234,767 tons of bombs--over 60 percent of the total falling on Axis Europe during the entire war--between July 1944 and April 1945. The Combined Bomber Offensive killed 305,000 German civilians, wounded 780,000, rendered 1,865,000 homeless, forced evacuation of 4,885,000, and deprived 20,000,000 of public utilities. By the third quarter of 1944, the campaign had tied down an estimated 4,500,000 workers, nearly 20 percent of the non-agricultural labor force, in air raid-related activities. Bombing had destroyed half the supply of all petroleum products by December 1944, while reserves of aviation gasoline had fallen by 90 percent of their level when the oil campaign began in May. The attack on transportation that began in September 1944 had, in five months, lessened the volume of railroad car loadings by 75 percent.

B-29s dropped 147,000 tons of bombs on Japan during the whole of the Pacific War, but only 7,180 tons fell prior to the first fire raid on 9 March 1945. Twentieth Air Force conducted fire assaults against 66 Japanese cities, killing 330,000 civilians and rendering 8,500,000 homeless. Production hours lost because of bombing rose from 20 percent in 1944 to over 40 percent in July 1945, by which time industrial production had declined to 35 percent

of the Japanese wartime peak.

Destruction of the enemy's war-making capability marked only one of the goals of the Allied bombing offensives; destruction of the enemy's will was an aim of equal importance. Compiled by a team primarily of civilian researchers at the end of World War II, The United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) concluded that the bombing of Germany "did not stiffen [German] morale," Yet it also revealed that the German populace could withstand the Allied air onslaught:

The mental reaction of the German people to air attack is significant. Under ruthless control they showed surprising resistance to the terror and hardships of repeated air attack, to the destruction of their homes and belongings, and to the conditions under which they were reduced to live. Their morale, their beliefs in ultimate victory or satisfactory compromise, and their confidence in their leaders declined, but they continued to work efficiently as long as the physical means of production remained. The power of a police state over its people cannot be underestimated.

Against the Japanese, LeMay's fire raids produced an increasing disenchantment with the war. When the incendiary attacks began in March 1945, 19 percent of the Japanese civil populace believed that Japan could not achieve victory; just prior to the surrender in August the total had increased to 68 percent, of which over one-half of the individuals interviewed credited air attacks, other than the atomic raids, as the principal reason for their beliefs. By the time of Hiroshima, some members of the Japanese Supreme War Council already favored peace. The atomic attacks induced the Emperor to intervene in the usual functioning of the Council to secure an armistice. Thus, concluded the Survey, the atomic bombs "did foreshorten the war and expedite the peace."

The Survey did not claim that strategic bombing achieved victory in either the European or Pacific theaters; however, it surmised that had Allied armies not overrun Germany in 1945, bombing would have halted the nation's armament production by May, resulting in the collapse of German resistance a few months thereafter. Likewise, the Survey asserted that "certainly prior to 31 December 1945. Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered

the war, and even if no land invasion had been planned or contemplated." The Survey further claimed that the application of Allied air power in Europe was "decisive," and implied the same in its summation of the Pacific War.<sup>28</sup>

What this data meant depended on your perspective. If you were a strategic airpower advocate, the "facts" were that military air campaigns decided the European and the Japanese conflicts.<sup>29</sup> If the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) didn't always say that outright, it came close:

. . . The outstanding significance of the air in modern warfare is recognized by all who participated in the war in Europe or who have had an opportunity to evaluate the results of aerial offensive . . .<sup>30</sup>  
. . . By the end of 1943 we had achieved through combat at the augmentation of our (air) forces, such clear-cut superiority over the Japanese in all elements of air power that eventual victory was assured . . .<sup>31</sup>

Others' viewpoints assessed the "facts" quite differently. Strategic airpower was not a stand alone force. As mentioned earlier, German fighters had mauled unescorted bombers and even "properly employed" strategic power (bombers with long range fighter support) did not achieve unconditional German surrender. Even the USSBS had to acknowledge the power of a police state over its people. So, at the end of WWII there was no consensus on strategic airpower and whether or not air campaigns could decide a conflict. Nor was there a consensus on this issue when the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the U.S. take over the fighting in South Vietnam.

On 1 June 1964 a top-level strategy conference convened at CINCPAC Headquarters in Honolulu.<sup>32</sup> The major players stated

their positions as follows. CINCPAC, Admiral Harry D. Felt wanted to mine the harbors of North Vietnam and institute graduated response airstrikes that started at the DMZ and worked toward the North Vietnamese heartland. The Army Chief of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler and Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara wanted to fight a land war in South Vietnam. Air power would be relegated to a conventional role of close air support and logistical interdiction. Only the Air Force Chief of Staff, Curtis E. Lemay, argued for direct attacks against the war-making will and capability of North Vietnam.<sup>33</sup> In the end, General Wheeler and Secretary McNamara carried the day. As General Momyer saw it:

We would build the South Vietnamese armed forces; provide combat support when the South Vietnamese were unable to handle the situation; and if air attacks against North Vietnamese targets were necessary, we would select targets on or near the DMZ and would use both U.S. and South Vietnamese aircraft.<sup>34</sup>

The above strategy seems to be at odds with our previous analysis. First, American training and motivation of South Vietnamese forces must have presumed there was indigenous support for the U.S. policy and presence. History indicated such support was not likely. Next, limiting our military actions to South Vietnam presumed this was a revolutionary war; otherwise, U.S. actions would not have been so limited against the North. Again, history indicated this was a conventional conflict between North and South Vietnam. Finally, the proposed use of airpower was tactical and severely limited by target numbers in South Vietnam.

However, strategic use of airpower would be appropriate if North Vietnam were the enemy. Despite these arguments, for the next eight years, airpower would almost totally support the land army.

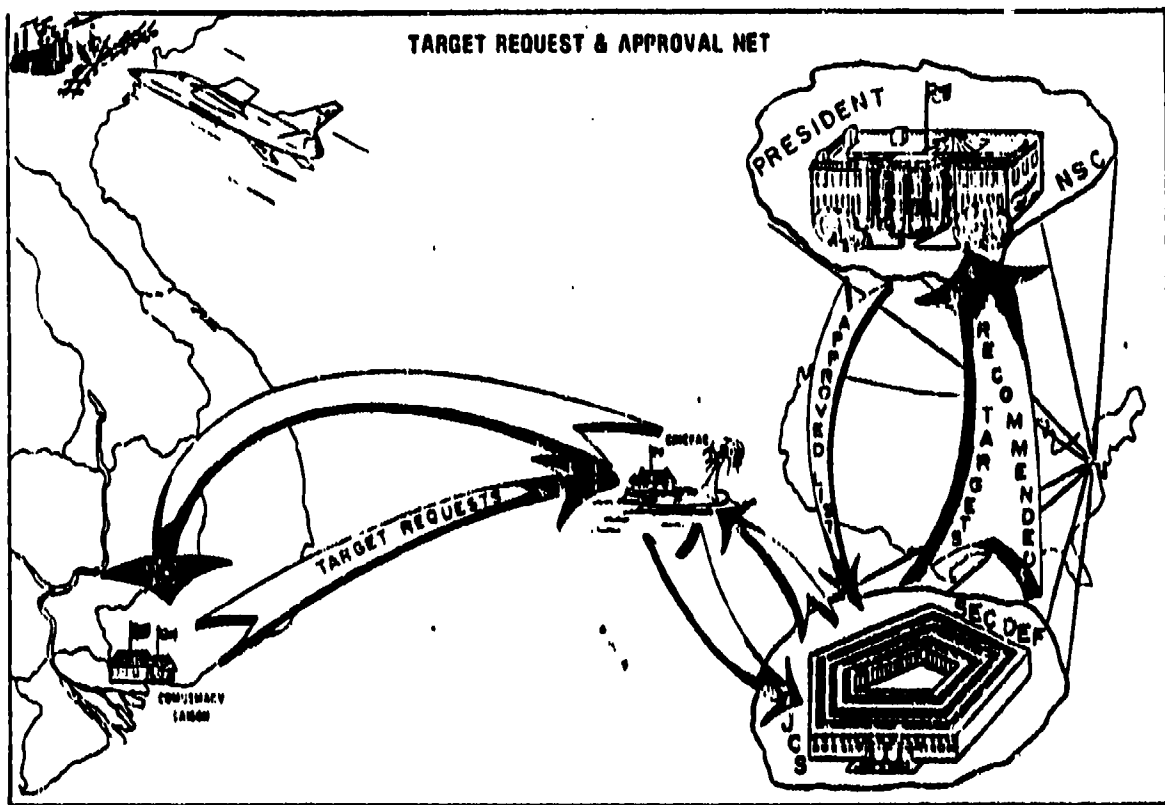
In his historical overview of military air action from 1965 to 1972, Mr. M.F. Porter\* provides an important analysis of the air war in Vietnam. From 1965 to 1968 the Air Force conducted Rolling Thunder. This operation emphasized use of air assets in a policy of graduated escalation with heavy emphasis on centralized control.

The operations were controlled from the highest levels. SEA Targets could be validated only by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) or higher authority; even when validated, they could not be struck until authorized, and such authorization often specified day, time, force structure, and weaponry. At the operational level, these restrictions hindered the achievement of the three stated aims. A 30 nautical mile (NM)-radius ring around Hanoi and a 10 NM-radius ring drawn around Haiphong delineated no-strike zones and so gave these areas of war resource sanctuary against strikes. A proscription against mining the harbors left the major ports--Haiphong, Hon Gay, and Cam Pha--open to foreign shipping, and through these ports came approximately 67 percent of NVN's external support.<sup>35</sup> (See figure 8)

Clearly, we were not involved in the kind of war Douhet or Mitchell envisioned after WWI. The emphasis was not on striking industrial and population centers thereby destroying the national will to fight. Interestingly after eighteen months

\*Note: Mr. Porter prepared the Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) Report for HQ PACAF. This report dealt specifically with the Vietnam Air War from 1965 to 1972.

## CENTRALIZED CONTROL OF AIRPOWER



Source: General Momyer; Airpower in Three Wars

Figure 8

of limited, tactical airwarfare; another voice rose to support General Lemay's position.

Admiral Sharp, then Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), stated in a November 1965 message to the JCS that unless restrictions against striking at the sources were lifted (and mining of the aforementioned ports allowed), "foreign shipping would continue to re-supply the system, and the U.S. air effort would harass but not effectively deter infiltration."<sup>36</sup>

This message and others like it could not sway the policymakers. Airpower was for tactical use and that use would be tightly controlled. What then was the overall effect of these restrictions? Again quoting from Mr. Porter's Project CHECO report, page 3:

In effect, these constraints provided the enemy an open-ended funnel at the top, into which they could pour the supplies necessary in their attempt to obtain what they needed at the bottom--South Vietnam--regardless of U.S. interdiction efforts against the LOCs in between. These were not the only constraints that hampered successful prosecution of the Rolling Thunder campaign. Before 29 June 1966, no major Petroleum-Oil-Lubricants (POL) storage facilities could be struck, or certain other lucrative targets, such as the Thai Nguyen Steel Plant.

We were not involved in classic Clausewitzian warfare; but we were following Clausewitz's primary maxim: military policy, is an extension of the political process. When political and diplomatic strategies failed to secure the wavering South Vietnamese government, war became the natural extension of our policy. Unfortunately, our war policy seemed to be fatally flawed from the beginning. The ends were not clear and culminating points were not defined. I believe these flaws



can be summarized as follows. First, indigenous South Vietnamese support for U.S. national policy was inversely proportional to the U.S. presence in Vietnam. As U.S. troop numbers grew in South Vietnam, indigenous Vietnamese support for U.S. policy diminished. Second, we continued to misidentify the nature of the war. The 1968 Tet Offensive and the 1972 Spring Offensive strongly supported the conventional war philosophy. Nevertheless, several political advisors believed (then and now) it was a guerrilla conflict. Third, we continued to restrain our airpower to a land support role. In April 1972 things would change. President Nixon intended to resolve Vietnam with strategic airpower.

## Chapter III

### Linebacker II - The Operation

Now, as for ten years, there are three basic choices in Vietnam: (1) To move to a full scale war like Korea (2) to pull out; (3) to keep on, as we are going with extensive but measured support for the Vietnamese in fighting their own battles.

You are fully committed to the <sup>38</sup>third course, as Eisenhower was and Kennedy was.

Security advisor McGeorge  
Bundy to LBJ in 1964

What really matters now is how it all comes out . . . The U.S. will not have a credible policy if we fail and I will <sup>39</sup>have to assume responsibility for that development.

Richard Nixon, diary entry April 1972

"[The enemy] has now gone over the brink and so have we. We have the power to destroy his war-making capacity. The only question is whether we have the will to use that power. What distinguishes me from Johnson is that I have the will in spades. <sup>40</sup>

Richard Nixon to Henry Kissinger, Dec 1972

The introductory quotes signal a dramatic change in national perspective. In 1964 the U.S. national policy was limited support for the Vietnamese in their war against "guerrilla revolutionaries." By 1972 the national policy was very different. The President was ready to use strategic airpower as the instrument of national policy. The reasons for this change are varied and complex but can be summarized as follows.

First, as suggested earlier, the presence of 500,000 American ground troops generated mixed emotions in South Vietnam. American forces could prevent the collapse of the South Vietnam government, but the troops could not correct the social and political unrest. In 1972 Ky and Thieu had little more support

than the earlier Diem regime. To use a popular slogan of the era, U.S. forces could not win all the South Vietnamese "hearts and minds".

Second, it was becoming quite evident that North Vietnam was in this conflict for as long as necessary. This was particularly clear to U.S. military leaders after the 1968 Tet Offensive. As Mark Clodfelter put it:

Although the 1968 Tet Offensive was a psychological defeat for the United States, it was a military disaster for the North Vietnamese. Almost 40,000 Viet Cong, the core of the insurgent leadership died in the assault.

Despite these losses, U.S. intelligence monitored new offensive build-ups in North Vietnam and by 1972 (Spring) a new offensive was launched. Simply put, North Vietnam was fully committed to the war.

Third, the policy of tactical bombing with graduated response wasn't working. After all, Rolling Thunder was in full swing when the Tet Offensive was planned and finally executed. The fact that the enemy could mount such a major offensive brought the whole issue of effective airpower use into question. Enemy offensive action again in 1972 apparently verified the ineptness of previous use of military airpower. The previous years results strongly suggested there must be a new application of airpower if it was to be effective.

Finally, homefront support for the war was waning. Making

good on his campaign commitment on 20 April 1969, President Nixon announced he would withdraw 150,000 men from Vietnam by 1970.<sup>42</sup> By the middle of 1971, the President saw the situation thus:

"...I was prepared to step up the bombing...but there was no way of knowing whether that would make them (The North Vietnamese) adopt a more reasonable position before the American public's patience ran out...or before Congress just voted us out of the war..."<sup>43</sup>

There were, of course, many other factors that led President Nixon to choose Linebacker II as his policy tool in Vietnam. But the bottom line was simple; previous courses were unsuccessful. Linebacker II would be something different.

Between November and December 13, 1972 Secretary Kissinger was involved in long and frustrating negotiations to end the Vietnam War. The negotiations were complicated by both North and South Vietnam representatives. Each time a treaty seemed imminent Le Duc Tho (North Vietnam) or President Thieu (South Vietnam) would find objectionable issues and negotiations would collapse. Under these conditions, President Nixon felt sure Congress would stop military funds for Vietnam and perhaps the entire war when it convened in January 1973.<sup>44</sup>

President Nixon met with the Joint Chiefs on 30 November 1972 to discuss military options if negotiations failed. The Chiefs had several plans, some of which involved B52s (with extensive escort and support) striking into the heartland of North Vietnam's industry. On 11 December Le Duc Tho rejected the most recent Kissinger peace efforts and on 13 December,

North Vietnamese negotiators demanded major changes to previously agreed upon positions. On 14 December, Kissinger telegraphed Nixon:

"...(it is time) to turn hard on Hanoi and increase pressure enormously..."<sup>45</sup>

Later that same day President Nixon told Admiral Moore (Chairman JCS): "This is your chance to use military power effectively to win this war and if you don't I'll consider you personally responsible."<sup>46</sup> Still later the same day, Strategic Air Command was notified to implement Linebacker II.

TACAIR from Vietnam and Thailand would constitute the day-time strike force while B52s at Andersen (Guam) and U-Tapao (Thailand) would be the primary night strike force (See Figure 9). Heavily supported by other air assets, B52s would strike critical targets in the Hanoi/Haiphong area (See Figure 10). These targets included railyards, storage areas, power plants, communication centers, airfields, etc. Thus the effort was aimed at warfighting capability. But the North Vietnamese will to fight was also a target. As Admiral Moore told General Meyer (CINCSAC):

"I want the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs."<sup>47</sup>

Generally, the B52 sorties were flown as follows:

- A) Night only to maximize enemy problems associated with visual acquisition
  - B) Refueling for Andersen bombers was enroute to target
  - C) FL320 (or higher) to minimize AAA effects
  - D) Three ship cell with two to three minute spacing
- (see figure 11)

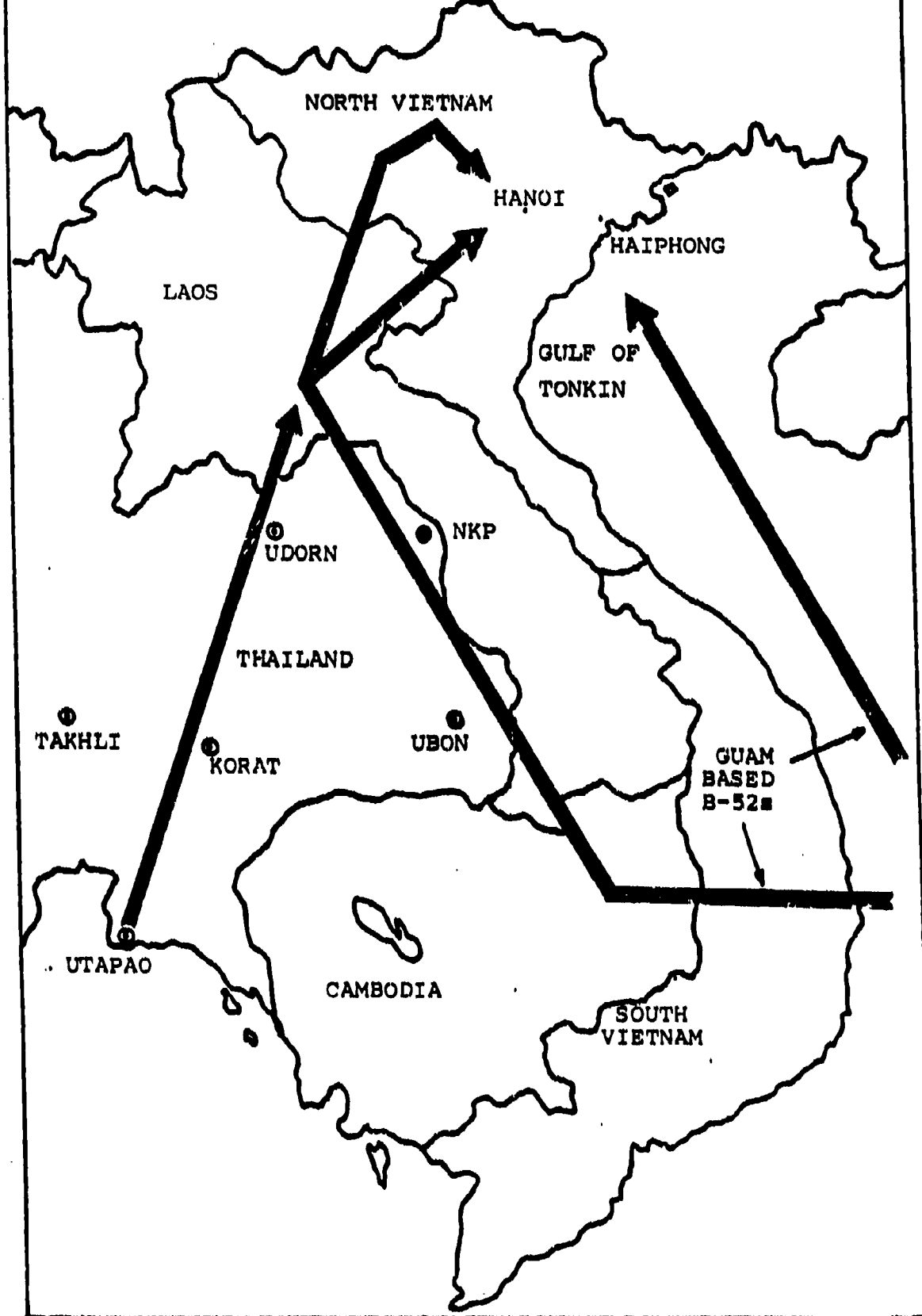
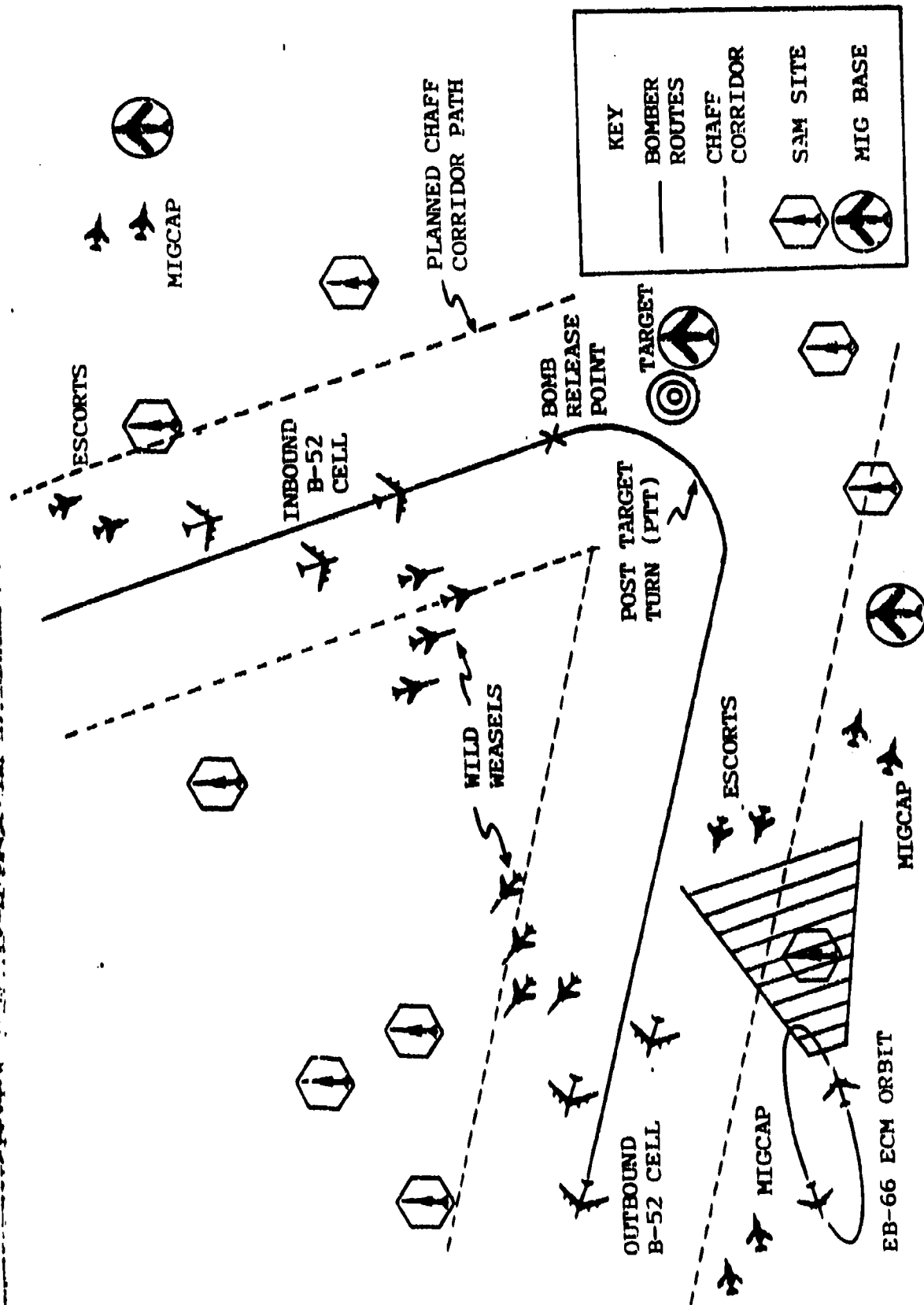
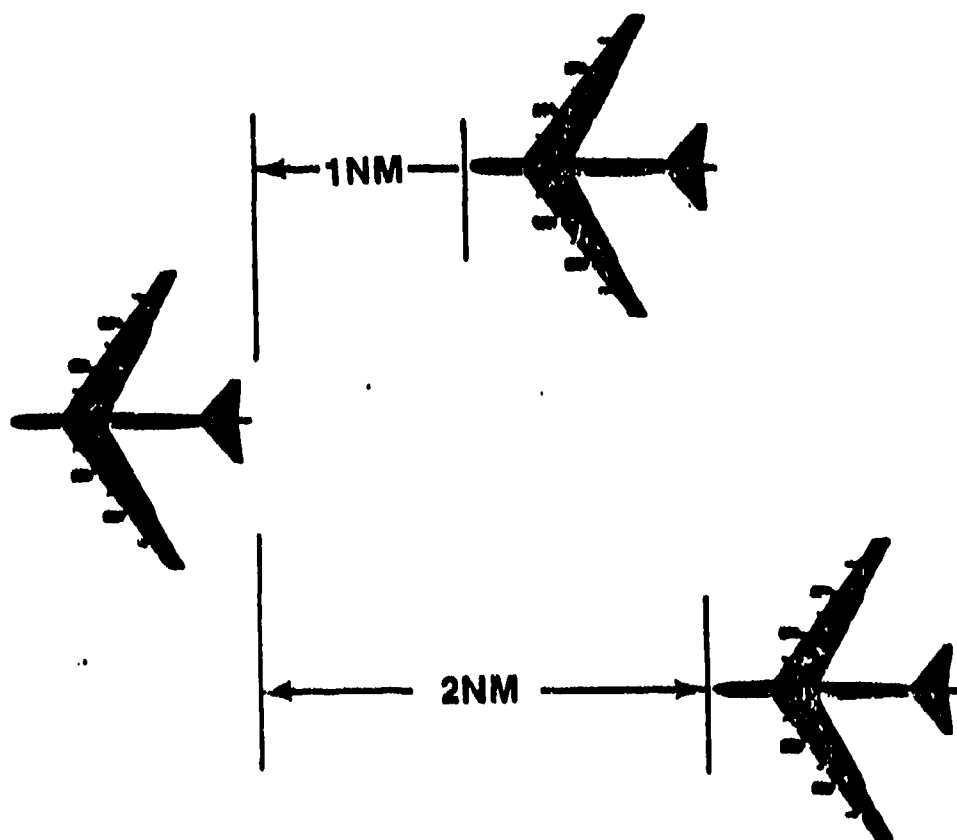
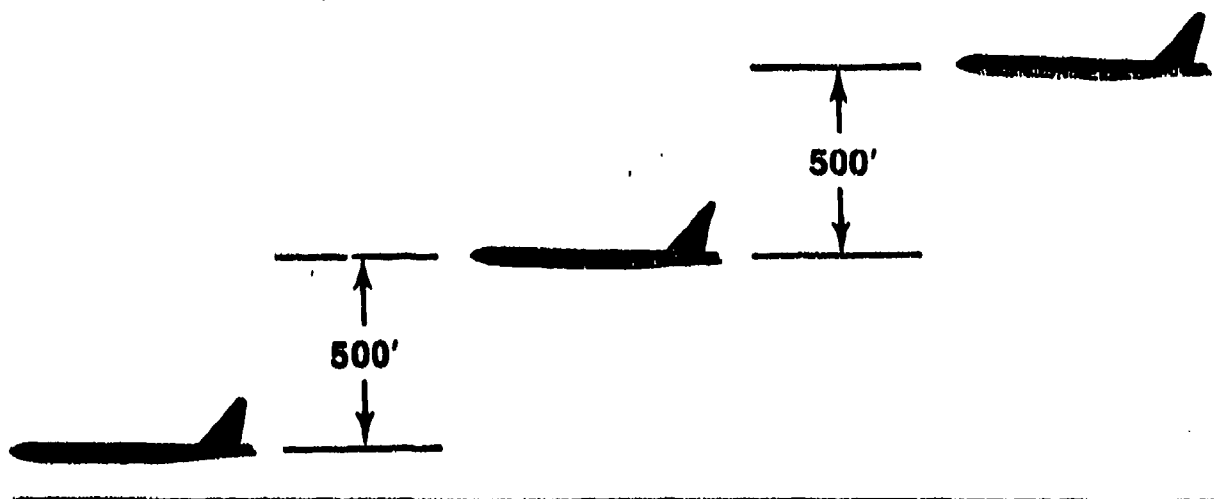


Figure 9. LINEBACKER II B-52 Attack Routes.  
Source: Major Clement; A Fourth of July in December



Typical LINEBACKER II Night Strike Package Plan (Days 1-3).

Figure 10



Enroute Cell Formation. The enroute cell formation consisted of three aircraft in two-mile trail. The second and third aircraft each stacked up 500 feet vertically to provide aircraft altitude separation. This same formation was used during "MSG" bomb releases.

Figure 11  
Source: B52 Technical Order



E) Ingress and Egress would follow standard tracks

(see figure 12)

F) Maneuvering from IP to bomb release was prohibited

The support packages for these strikes were as follows:<sup>48</sup>

1) 8 F-4 Chaff dispensers

2) 8 F-105/F-4C Wild Weasels

3) 10 F-4 escorts

4) 10 MIGCAP F-4s

5) 5 EB66s

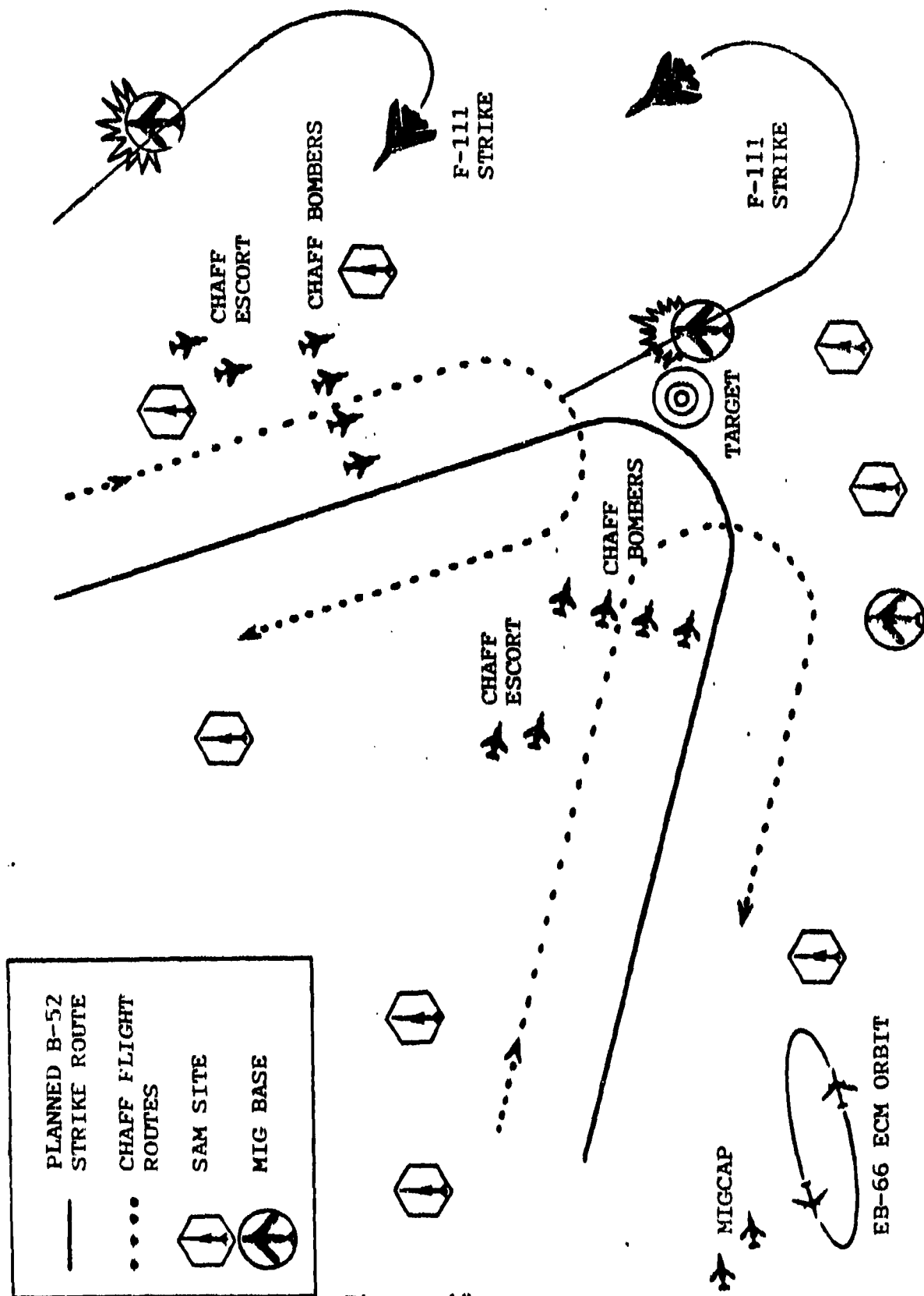
6) 20 F-111 pre-emptive strikes or additional targets

7) Airborne assets would assist command and control  
(See figure 14)

In retrospect, Linebacker II is generally viewed as an immensely successful air campaign. However, on 14 December 1972, just four days before the conflict began, the planners and crew members viewed things a little differently.

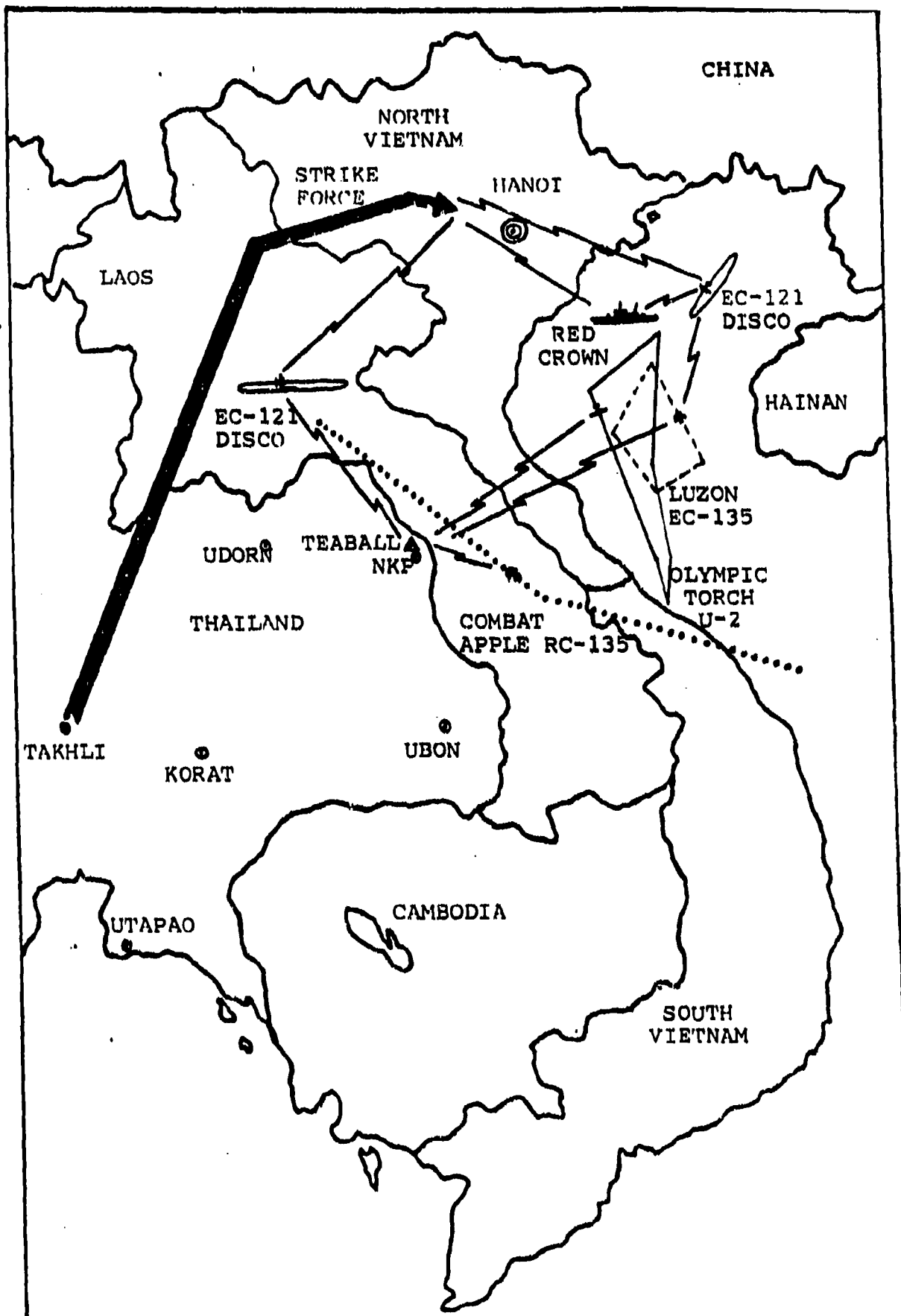
General Gerald W. Johnson, Eighth Air Force Commander, was at Andersen AFB for Linebacker II to supervise operations, and he was not pleased as operational orders arrived from HQSAC. These orders bore little resemblance to the order of battle previously developed by the staff at Andersen under General Johnson's supervision.<sup>49</sup> It seemed very late in the game to revise the warplan; nevertheless, the Andersen staff incorporated the HQSAC staff changes and the flight profiles were ready by 17 December.

As a former B52 "D" model driver myself, a lot of my friends



Typical LINEBACKER II Night Strike preparation effort. F-111 and Chaff Flights were flown about 10-15 minutes prior to B-52 TOTs.

Figure 12  
Source: Major Eschman: Role of TALAM



USAF Command and Control System.

Figure 14

Source: Major Clement, Fourth of July in December

were crewmembers who flew Linebacker II; they also had some misgivings which included the following. First, the proposed route of flight over the target did not vary from day to day. Second, there was a strict rule prohibiting B52 maneuvers against surface to air missiles (SAMs) acquired visually. [The SAC staff believed random maneuvers reduced effectiveness of electronic countermeasures (ECM).] Third, post target turns sometimes took you back over the threat area. And, finally, there was the natural apprehension when you launch into a major offensive with little warning and little practice which approximates the task at hand. Nevertheless, on Monday afternoon 18 December, 190 B52 crews were ready to go.

The TACAIR folks also had questions about the strike tactics.

As Major Karl Eschmann recalls:

One of the most difficult aspects was the fact that the support aircraft used to cover the (night) B52 strikes had to recover to their home stations and then be regenerated to support daylight (next day) TACAIR missions. A great deal of controversy also surfaced over the intended SAC planned tactics. Although the lessons learned by TACAIR during Linebacker I (just 8 months earlier) emphasized the avoidance of stereotyped tactics which could aid enemy defenses, it became apparent that the SAC planners had not paid any attention to the lessons learned during Linebacker I. The SAC tactics appeared to violate two basic tenets of warfare: attacks would be made in a piecemeal fashion by using three distinct waves over a single target area and worse, they would originate from the same points since all of the B52 cells flew basically the same paths and altitudes.<sup>50</sup>

So planners and executioners were not completely in agreement on the proposed tactics for Linebacker II; however as General Patton once said: "The game is set and nothing will stop it

now."

### Day One

At 1451 (Guam time) Major Bill Stocker led WAVE 1 off Andersen AFB toward North Vietnam. A few hours later, the first major operational problem arose.<sup>51</sup> Bombers did not have enough fuel to complete their mission and return to Guam. The planners resolved this issue by arranging for post-strike refuelings and the B52s pressed on. Around 1800 local (Vietnam time) the fighter support packages were rolling. About 15 minutes before the B52s arrived, F-111s, F4s, EB-66s and F105s engaged the enemy (see figure 15).<sup>52</sup> The EB66s jammed enemy radars; F-105Gs and F-4Cs attacked SAM sites and other ground threats; F4Ds provided support against enemy aircraft; and the F-111s provided additional ECM and ground attack support.

Around 1925 the B52s arrived. The targets, railyards, SAM sites, airfields and combat support areas, were all struck successfully. The losses were viewed as acceptable: 3 B52s lost, two severely damaged, one F-111 lost (the only TACAIR loss). During this first attack, the enemy expended over 200 SAMs.<sup>53/54</sup>

### Days Two and Three

Basically, day two and three were repeats of day one. During daylight raids, A7s and F4s attacked SAM sites, airfields and key enemy logistic targets. At night, the B52s and their support packages went North against strategic targets around Hanoi. On day two, the enemy again fired about 200 SAMs; however



there were no losses of U.S. aircraft. It seemed the planned tactics were working, but on day three things were very different. On day three four B52Gs and two B52Ds were shot down and a third B52D sustained serious damage.<sup>55/56</sup> Of the 27 B52s launched, seven were casualties - 25% of the strike force. This was not the psychological impact intended. Everyone from the President down knew a change was in order.

Many of the changes were tactical. Aircrews would lay several chaff corridors before the B52s arrived. Thus the enemy would not be certain where "to look" for the bombers. Attacks on SAM sites would increase since intelligence sources indicated enemy missile reserves were low.<sup>57</sup> Raids were reduced to 30 B52s; all of which were B52Ds (no Gs) flown out of Utapao, Thailand. This reduced flying time, tanker support and losses since B52Ds had better ECM than the G models. Finally, the TACAIR support force was doubled in size. With these changes, day four of Linebacker II began.<sup>58</sup>

#### Day Four

Clear weather permitted nearly unrestricted operations and the TACAIR strikes decimated railroad complexes at Giap Nhi Trung Quan, Duc Noi, and Hanoi. Additionally TACAIR attacked the Hanoi AM transmitter and the Hanoi Thermal Power Plant. The force package to accomplish these actions was as follows: 16 A-7s (accompanied by LORAN equipped F-4s); and 46 F-4 fighter-bombers. Using mass and momentum, all attacks took place with a ten minute window (between 1305 and 1315 Hanoi time).<sup>59</sup>

The B52 and supporting fighter packages continued to improve their tactics. The 30 B52Ds from Utapao, Thailand now had almost 60 TACAIR support aircraft. These included 2 IRON HAND flights used to provide chaff for ECM support.<sup>60</sup> With the B52 cells now compressed from four minute spacing to 90 second spacing, time over target and threats from terminal defenses were reduced by over 50% (from 40 minutes down to 15 minutes). Airfields at Quang Le, Bac Mai and Van Dien supply depot were the primary targets. All were struck with significant resulting damage. Although two B52s were lost, the overall results were deemed highly successful.<sup>61</sup> The air operation seemed to be back on track.

#### Day Five

On 22 December 76 TACAIR fighter-bombers and 81 support aircraft struck more railyards at Thai Nguyen, Lan Lau, Bac Giang, Kep and Viet Tri. 24 A7s, 20 LORAN F4s and 8 F-4s with laser guided weapons significantly damaged all targets amid light resistance. Nevertheless, there were several MIG engagements and Lt Col Brunson and Maj Pickett in Buick 01 (an F-4) did score a MIG kill.<sup>62</sup>

Again, that night 30 B52s and about 60 supporting TACAIR aircraft struck the Haiphong railyard. Tactics continued to improve and there were no B52 losses and only one TACAIR loss (an F-111). In addition to expanding the chaff corridor over the Haiphong area (about 30 NM x 12 NM) planners had the B52s strike the target from six different axes of attack. This combination of tactics seemed to be very effective because only



43 SAMs were fired with no hits.<sup>63</sup> The target area damage assessment again verified a successful mission.

#### Day Six

TACAIR sent 68 fighter-bombers and 77 support aircraft again the Ha Gia and Dai Loi railroad bridges and the Hoa Lac airfield. Although weather precluded use of precision guided munitions, all targets were struck with MK-82 500 lb iron bombs. There were no reports of SAM attacks and only one reported MIG engagement.<sup>64</sup>

The B52 and TACAIR night strike took on a very different look compared to the previous nightly missions. Guam B52s (12) rejoined the effort along with 18 Utapao B52s. The targets were the Lang Dang railyards and SAM sites up near the Chinese border. Unfortunately, weather, communications and command problems conspired to prevent most of the TACAIR force from accompanying the B52s. Only the F-111s (for airfield suppression) rendezvoused with the B52s.<sup>65</sup> Surprisingly, this seemed to catch the defenders off-guard. Without the typical pre-strike preparation, apparently the enemy was caught napping. Only five SAMs were fired and there were no hits. All targets were struck successfully.<sup>66/67</sup>

#### Day Seven

In the day before Christmas, TACAIR launched 32 LORAN F-4s on restrikes of Thai Nguyen and Bac Giang railyards. Resistance was light and all targets received light to moderate damage.<sup>68</sup>

For the night strikes, 30 Utapao B52s restruct the Kep and Thai Nguyen railyards. Again the multi-axis attack tactics

was successfully employed. The B52s were in and out of the target area within minutes and again there were no losses. Additionally, F-111s struck airfields at Yen Bai, Kep and Phuc Yen just prior to the B52 strikes.<sup>69/70</sup>

#### Day Eight

The TACAIR strikes consisted of 48 strike aircraft (32 A-7s, 16 LORAN F-4s) and 53 support aircraft. All had just one target: the Hanoi Transformer station. Amidst light enemy resistance, the target was struck successfully.<sup>71</sup>

The big news lay in that night's activity. On this night 120 B52s and 114 TACAIR aircraft struck numerous railyards around the Hanoi area (see figure 15A). SAM suppression forces were beefed up to include 18 IRON HAND aircraft, 10 F4Es (Hunter-Killers) and 12 F111s providing airfield suppression. Additionally, 24 F-4 chaff bombers helped to saturate enemy defenses. The B52s continued to employ their multiple axis attack tactics quite successfully. The 120 B52s attacked 10 different targets almost simultaneously. The entire air package was in and out of the threat area in less than fifteen minutes. Although two B52s were lost to SAMs, the mission again was judged successful: 9,932 bombs on target.<sup>72/73</sup>

#### Day Nine

52 strike and 65 support TACAIR aircraft were targeted against three radio transmitters at Hanoi. All targets were struck and damaged extensively although enemy resistance was intense. All flights reported numerous SAMs, heavy AAA and

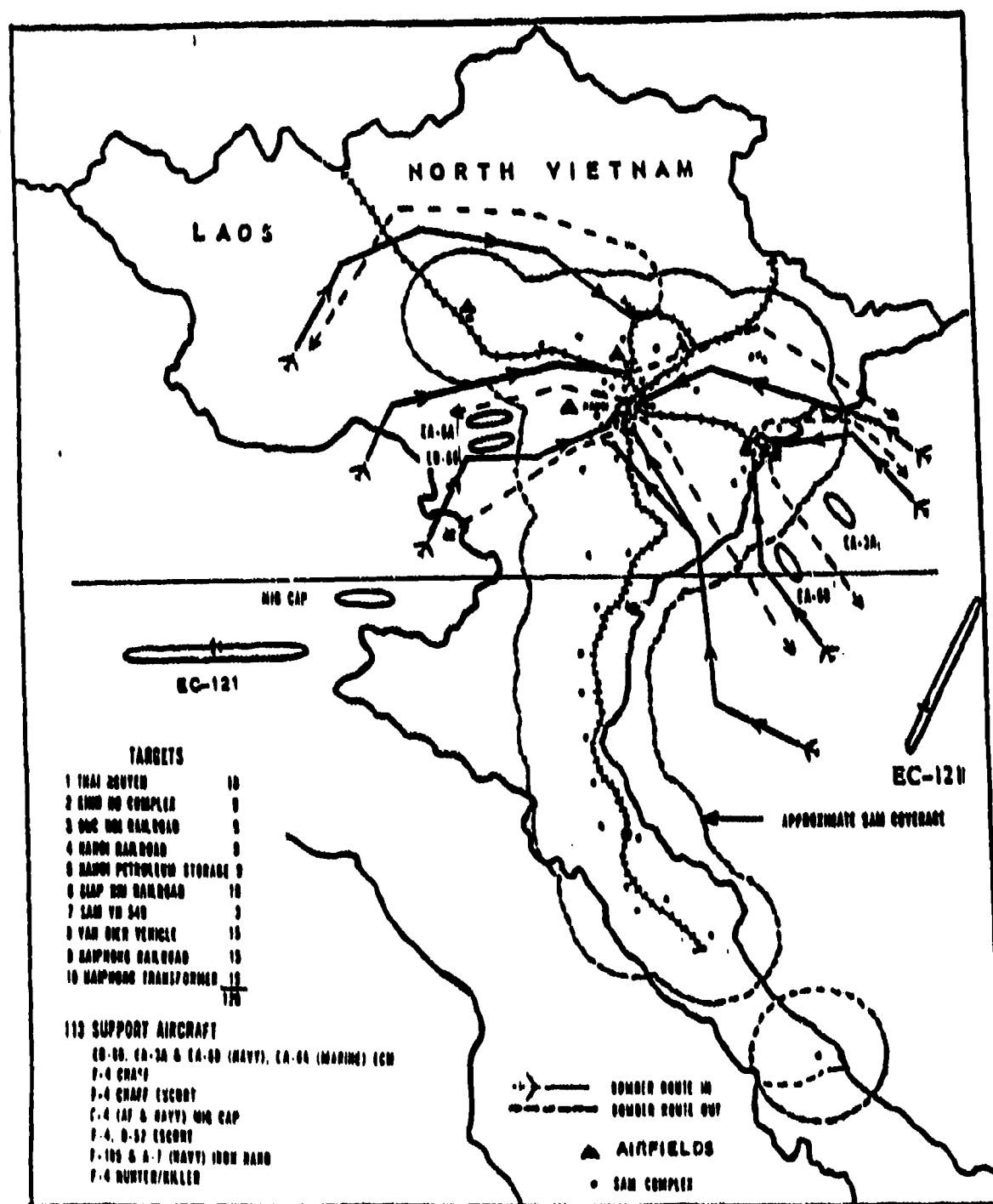


Figure 13a. Day 8 B-52 Attack Plan.

several MIG engagements. Interestingly, one of the targets, the Radio Hanoi Transmitter, had been the recipient of a previous raid of 36 B52s. Much of the support structure had been damaged but the actual transmitter, which was well protected with reinforced walls, continued to function. On this day F-4 laser guided bombs went directly into the transmitter building completely destroying the transmitter capability.<sup>74</sup>

That night, the B52 strike force was reduced to 60 B52s which struck the Land Dang and Duc Noi railyards as well as the Van Dilm depot and several surrounding SAM sites. B52Gs were used for the first time since 20 December. The TACAIR support package counted 101 aircraft which again blanketed the target area with chaff. On Day nine the final losses of Linebacker II were recorded. TACAIR lost two F4s to SAMs and SAC lost one (the last) B52 to a SAM.<sup>75</sup>

#### Day Ten

TACAIR sent 48 strike and 61 support aircraft against Hanoi railyards and depots. Again all targets were struck with considerable damage. There was an interesting lesson learned. Although the weather was clear enough to use precision guided munitions, one of the aimpoints required laser designation into a body of water. This didn't work too well since the water reflected most of the laser energy. Nevertheless, crews made adjustments and accomplished the mission.<sup>76</sup>

That night 60 B52s again struck Lang Dang railyards, the Phuc Yen SAM facility, the Duc Noi depot and surrounding SAM

sites. In addition the TACAIR support included 16 F111s for airfield suppression and 22 F-4 chaff bombers which again blanketed the target area. All targets were struck successfully and enemy resistance was markedly reduced.<sup>77</sup>

#### Day Eleven

93 TACAIR aircraft struck the Trai Ca SAM facility. Again enemy resistance was light with only two MIGs and no SAMs sighted.<sup>78</sup>

On the final night, 60 B52s and 10 F-111s struck Lang Dang, Phuc Yen and Trai Ca facilities. Only 23 SAMs were sighted.<sup>79</sup>

On 29 December 1972, it was over. CINCPAC received instructions to terminate military actions north of 20° latitude and later that same day, President Nixon announced the resumption of peace talks.

## Chapter IV

### Linebacker II - Lessons Learned

Everything that tactical air does directly supports  
Army Operations. <sup>80</sup>

General Robert Russ, CINCTAC  
7 Dec 88

#### STRATEGIC AIRPOWER CAN WORK

If TACAIR supports Army operations, then what is the role of "STRATEGIC AIR." For that matter what is strategic air? I believe strategic use of military air relates directly to targets. If you go after the enemy's military industrial base, his will to fight, his political military structure; then you use airpower strategically. The issue does not rest on what airframe you employ. B52s and B-1s can support tactical operations. F-15s and F-16s could attack strategic targets. However you consider the point, Linebacker II was an example of strategic application of airpower. Big and little airplanes from the Air Force and the Navy participated in an air campaign designed to achieve political objectives (a return to the bargaining table on U.S. terms) through strategic use of military aviation. It worked. In 1989 there may well be other scenarios where employment of airpower would be the fulcrum of the theater campaign plan. The history of Linebacker II and its lessons should be a part of every warfighters repertoire.

### SIMPLICITY (IF NOT PARAMOUNT) IS A GOOD IDEA

Over the past twenty years, numerous commanders of combat operations have advised me to keep initial combat orders simple. I believe that is good advice. As mentioned earlier, crewmembers were not thrilled with air orders to fly the same route, same time, same day but this simplicity had some valuable features. Operators could concentrate more on terminal tactics and not have to worry about major changes in every aspect of their plan. For instance, if Korat TACAIR Crews knew they would launch at 1300L each day, planning could center on this environment. Would it have been better to launch one day at dawn and the next at dusk? Maybe, but what kind of logistic and support problems would this involve? If the sorties are during dark, how do I use precision weapons. What different training and briefings do operators require? By going at a set time against a controlled array of targets, the air campaigners directed the majority of their effort at bombs on target and supporting air packages. I believe the keep it simple approach was correct. HOWEVER...

### YOU CAN GET SMARTER AS YOU GO

By day four the TACAIR support sorties for the B52 raids were twice the original day one size. Also, B52s were now using multi-axis attack and dropping over 9,000 weapons on target in less than 15 minutes.<sup>81</sup> Could the war planners have used these tactics successfully on day one? Maybe, but personal

experience indicates the original plan was the smart move. Start simple and then build on your experience. This is especially important when the operation is not something you practice at frequent intervals.

#### YOU DON'T ALWAYS TRAIN LIKE YOU FIGHT

There are many reasons for this. Some are financial. You just don't have enough resources to let crews drop real bombs and launch real air to air and air to ground missiles on every mission. Some restraints on training involve logistics and support. Crews can't go to Nevada test ranges every week if they are in Europe or Alaska or Korea. Also host government restrictions mitigate the amount and type of training you may conduct. Finally, some of the restraints on training involve safety or peacetime restrictions. What seems like a good idea for combat may not be feasible in a non-combat environment.

#### Clausewitz still applies

Following the missions on 24 December, President Nixon directed a 36 hour bombing pause for Christmas. The President hoped Hanoi was ready to negotiate. Apparently, they were not. Clausewitz would have disapproved of the bombing pause:

Now if every action in war is allowed its appropriate duration, we would agree, at least at first sight, any additional expenditure of time, <sup>82</sup> any suspension of military action - seems absurd.

Only the enemy profited by the American unilateral pause. As Mark Clodfelter put it:



(On 26 December) A multitude of SAMs streaked through the dark sky, revealing that Hanoi's defenders had used the (XMAS) intermission to bolster their armaments.<sup>83</sup>

As the old cliché reminds us: "When you got 'em down, keep 'em down."

#### Sun Tzu also applies

"Thus, while we have heard of blundering swiftness in war, we have not yet seen a clever operation that was prolonged."

Over a four year period, President Johnson conducted the air operation, Rolling Thunder. This was not a terribly successful air campaign; nevertheless, it still generated a core of opposition to Presidential politics in Vietnam. Linebacker II also generated considerable heat for President Nixon; nevertheless, this operation was highly successful and it lasted less than two weeks. Military actions usually create debate. Apparently short-duration, intense actions carry fewer liabilities than drawn out contests. Linebacker II, El Dorado Canyon and Urgent Fury seem to support this hypothesis.

#### First the defenses, then the targets

Attackers in Linebacker II "plowed" through the Vietnamese defenses. During the first three nights of the operation, over 600 SAMs were fired at the bombers. This threat could have been significantly reduced by concerted air to ground attacks of enemy missile sites before initiation of Linebacker II. U.S. forces did not preemptively strike these targets for the

following reasons:

- (1) Many SAM sites were not on previously "approved" target lists
- (2) The element of surprise for Linebacker II might be compromised

Retrospectively, neither of these seems to be a good reason for not taking out SAM defenses prior to Linebacker II. There are few historical data points on this issue; however, I believe opening holes in enemy defenses prior to strategic air actions is a sound concept even if it militates against tactical surprise. This is especially true in our era where intelligence gathering devices almost preclude strategic surprise.

The troops will fight

In his book, A View From the Rock, Gen. McCarthy documents the tenacity of the bomber crews even after the day three disasters.<sup>84</sup> Conversely, Mark Clodfelter points out the increase in visits to the flight surgeon by Linebacker II crewmembers.<sup>85</sup> On the TACAIR side, pilots told me that many of the tactics used were questionable, intelligence assessments of the battlefield were often in error and lessons learned from previous air operations were not applied. Also, several SAC bomber crews decried planned tactics which they believed led to the third night disaster. A few TACAIR and SAC bomber crewmembers even refused to fly their assigned missions. Nevertheless, for 11 straight days and nights Linebacker II pounded North Vietnamese targets until the enemy decided to negotiate on U.S. terms. In short, a maximum effort air mission

seems to generate maximum crew effort.

It's tough to decentralize

If much of the Rolling Thunder operation was controlled by LBJ's "Tuesday Lunch Bunch", then no less control of Linebacker II rested with General John Meyer, CINCSAC. In his book on airpower in Vietnam, Mark Clodfelter presents the following:

Vogt complained to Meyer on 24 December that the delay in receiving essential SAC information prevented 7th AF from providing proper escort. He demanded notice of targets, routes, axes of attack and call call signs a minimum of 18 hours prior to bomb release. 8th AF planners also desired quicker receipt of strike information. On 25 December (Note: a week into the operation), Meyer gave 8th AF authority to select axes of attack and withdraw, yet he retained control over target selection...the preliminary target list once arrived from Offut 3 1/2 hours prior to takeoff, requiring the 8th AF staff to plan the mission in minimum time. Crews were waiting in their aircraft when they received their target packages.<sup>86</sup>

Much if not all work done by HQSAC could have been accomplished by 8th AF or even the wing staff at Andersen AFB. However, the lessons of war indicate it is tough to decentralize. General Meyer wanted personal supervision of the operation. Senior staff officers verify that General Meyer often slept in the SAC command post so he could have 24 hour/day real time information. This dedication is commendable, but obviously, the controls on decision-making generated problems. The lesson here is for senior commanders. They must determine the proper balance between supervision and direction. As General Perry Smith once told me: "Commanders should frequently go to their troops and ask 'How am I making your job harder?'"<sup>87</sup>

## Chapter V

### Linebacker II - Conclusions

During earlier airstrikes...the guards would fire at the passing aircraft with their AK-47s...they would shake their fists in our faces as a sign of defiance and would be laughing and joking...During the B-52 raids (of Linebacker II), you could see a different effect in the guard's faces. There was no joking, no laughing, no acts of defiance or reprisal. The guards, some openly weeping, simply headed for their shelters...and pull concrete lids over their heads.

Lt Col Jon Reynolds  
POW, North Vietnam

When I heard the B-52 bombs go off, I sent a message to our people. 'Pack your bags...we're going home.'

Colonel John P. Flynn  
POW, North Vietnam

These quotes and numerous others seem to validate the success of Linebacker II. Strategic application of military airpower changed the course of the Vietnam War. An enemy who fought for over a decade and suffered tremendous losses in manpower and material was brought contritely to the bargaining table after a single eleven day operation. As Ambassador George H. Aldrich noted:

Prior to Linebacker II, the North Vietnamese were intransigent, buying time, refusing to even discuss a formal meeting schedule. After Linebacker II, they were shaken, demoralized, and anxious to talk about anything.

So, from several viewpoints, Linebacker II was a major victory, but it took a long time to get there. As mentioned previously there were two principle causes. First, senior leadership saw Vietnam as a revolutionary war confined to the South.

In retrospect, it seems the U.S. misidentified the enemy.

The conflict was a conventional war between North and South. Had political and military planners seen North Vietnam's war industry and civilian will to fight as the enemy center of gravity, then U.S. Air Forces might have applied strategic airpower to the North in 1964. However, such was not the case. LBJ and many of his advisers were convinced that revolutionary guerrillas were the center of gravity. Obviously from this perspective, a Linebacker II operation against North Vietnam made little sense. But, misidentification of the enemy was not the only reason American policy makers delayed Linebacker II until 1972.

Throughout the Vietnam conflict, there was no consensus on the viability of strategic use of airpower to end the war. If General Lemay believed from the outset that airpower could decide the Vietnam issue; then General Taylor and Secretary McNamara were equally sure airpower was not the answer. If one analyst cited World War II and Korean statistics to "prove" the value of strategic airpower; then another analyst could cite Eisenhower and Churchill to "prove" airpower is only a supporting arm for the land army.<sup>91</sup> In short, the U.S. put hundreds of thousands of army troops in Vietnam because that was the traditional method of war. American airpower supported these troops with missions like the ARC LIGHT and Rolling Thunder efforts. Even after the 1968 TET Offensive, when it was clear to most observers that North Vietnam's political/military capability was the enemy center of gravity and not the Communist guerrillas; four more years would pass before

Linebacker II was enacted. But in 1972 a sequence of events came together that left President Nixon with only one military option in Vietnam. The sequence of events began in 1970 with the removal of 150,000 troops from Vietnam. The sequence continued as home front support waned and Congress threatened in late '72 to terminate funds for the Vietnam conflict. And finally, by November 1972 neither the North nor the South Vietnamese leaders approved U.S. peace proposals. President Nixon was faced with threats from Congress, intransigence from Vietnamese leaders and mounting U.S. troop withdrawals which made a major land action highly controversial and improbable at best. So President Nixon, with "the will in spades" to resolve the Vietnam issue, played his airpower card. It worked. Strategic application of military airpower accomplished in eleven days what the U.S. had wanted for almost ten years. For this reason, we need to know how Linebacker II (L.B.II) worked at the strategic level.

To analyze the strategic perspective, I'll take Colonel Harry Summers suggestion and use the Principles of War to address four questions.

Question One: What are we going to do?

"I think sir, anytime you conduct a military operation (L.B.II) like this the objective is quite clear in military terms. Of course, you can go on to say that war is an instrument of policy and that what we are all trying to do is to bring this war to a close so we can release the prisoners and cease U.S. participation."

Admiral Thomas H. Moorer<sup>92</sup>

Right or wrong, the President and the Chairman had clear

objectives. Bomb Hanoi's industry and shattered North Vietnam's will to stall peace negotiations and imprison American military personnel. The objective was not typical in military terms, but it was clear. If North Vietnam would approve U.S. peace accords and release American POWs, the bombing would stop. Clausewitz would probably have approved since military force would be used continuously until the political objectives were secured. U.S. national interests demanded two clear concessions from North Vietnam. To get those concessions, Linebacker II became the extension of an American policy which was perfectly clear.

Question Two: How are we going to do it?

Through strategic use of military airpower. Linebacker II was designed in classic Douhet terms. Military force in an air campaign would attack the enemy will and capability to fight. Plans for this and similar operations had been planned and discussed extensively. The operation would be different but not brand new. The control mechanisms and the required skills were already in place. Senior officers had enough battlefield intelligence to know what targets were appropriate and crewmembers had the ability to put bombs on those targets. The magnitude of the effort would be enormous, but U.S. planners tried to minimize this issue by following the next principle of war.

Question Three: Is it simple?

Yes, it was. Despite the complaints about chaff corridors which

announced the strike package arrival and strike routings that never changed, the operation was simple. Everybody knew his job. Of course, few people knew or understood jobs performed by other people, but that was acceptable. The idea was to keep it simple. It is appropriate to note that operational modifications were also simple. After the disaster on night three, planners made force packages smaller with better ECM. Also, B52 TACAIR support was larger with increased attacks on SAM sites. As the operation continued, more modifications ensued, but they were easy to assimilate because planners and crewmembers built on their experiences. Keeping it simple was also part of the final principle.

Question Four: Who will be in command?

The SAC commander, General Meyer, ran the bomber/tanker force and the 7th AF/CC General Vogt ran TACAIR. Admittedly there were conflicts in this arrangement, but how much better was it than the operations of LBJ and McNamara. Senior military planners controlled Linebacker II; there was none of the "Tuesday Lunch Bunch." Nevertheless, future operations of this magnitude might produce even better results if all air assets were controlled by the theater or Joint Task Force Commander.\*

In summary, Sixteen years after Linebacker II the issue of strategic airpower still begs the question: "Are there scenarios where strategic airpower should be the supported

\* Note: In an Aug 88 Air Force Magazine article, CINCSAC committed 66 B52s to theater commanders for conventional roles.



campaign strategy?" Can another Linebacker II favorable resolve a Korean or even a European conflict? If there is no answer to the question, at least there is discussion. General John Chain, CINCSAC, recently designated 66 B52s as a primary conventional strike force (with 33 additional B52s in a secondary role). SAC and TAF planners are reconsidering use of strategic airpower in a conventional European conflict.<sup>93</sup> These plans and discussions are important because we have come a long way since General Vandenburg said: "The overriding purpose of every airplane, whether it is a bomber or a fighter, is to win the air battle on which final victory on land or sea is predicated."<sup>94</sup> Airpower is not a stand alone force capable of resolving every conflict; however it seems equally unlikely that all Air Force operations exist to support the Army.

If future commanders propose the use of strategic airpower as their campaign strategy, I propose the following checklist to guide their planning.

Principles  
for  
Strategic Airpower Application

First,

Are there strategic targets?

-Is there an industrial-military web?

-Are there high value, national assets which directly impact the enemy's ability and will to fight?

Second,

Can we get political authorization to strike these strategic targets?

-Will the National Command Authority approve the suggested target list?

-Will the political leadership support strategic air attacks before and after the operation?

Third,

Can we achieve the required air superiority for ingress and egress?

-Do we have the appropriate quantity of assets for the planned strike?

-Is there an operational balance and match-up between strike and support aircraft?

Fourth,

Can we get sufficient intelligence of the battlefield before and during the air operation

-Can we accurately identify targets day or night?

-Can we assess the effectiveness of each airstrike with near real time information?

Fifth,

Do our existing weapons match with the target base?

-How many weapons are required for each target?

-How often must we restrike?

Sixth,

Are the "friendly" losses worth the effort?

-What sortie loss rate is acceptable?

-Can we vary tactics to reduce losses if required?

Seventh,

Does the enemy think this strategy will win?

-If we are successful, will the enemy capitulate our political demands?

-What are the enemy options that could deny success to the planned operation?

Eighth,

Is it simple?

-Can the troops follow the plan without extensive, centralized control?

-Does this plan consider previous training?

Ninth,

How do we terminate?

-Is there a starting and stopping point?

-Do political leaders understand and approve our plan?

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